DC

THE SINISTER HOUSE OF SECRET LOVE

The SINISTER HOUSE of SECRET LOVE

48 pages ONLY 25¢

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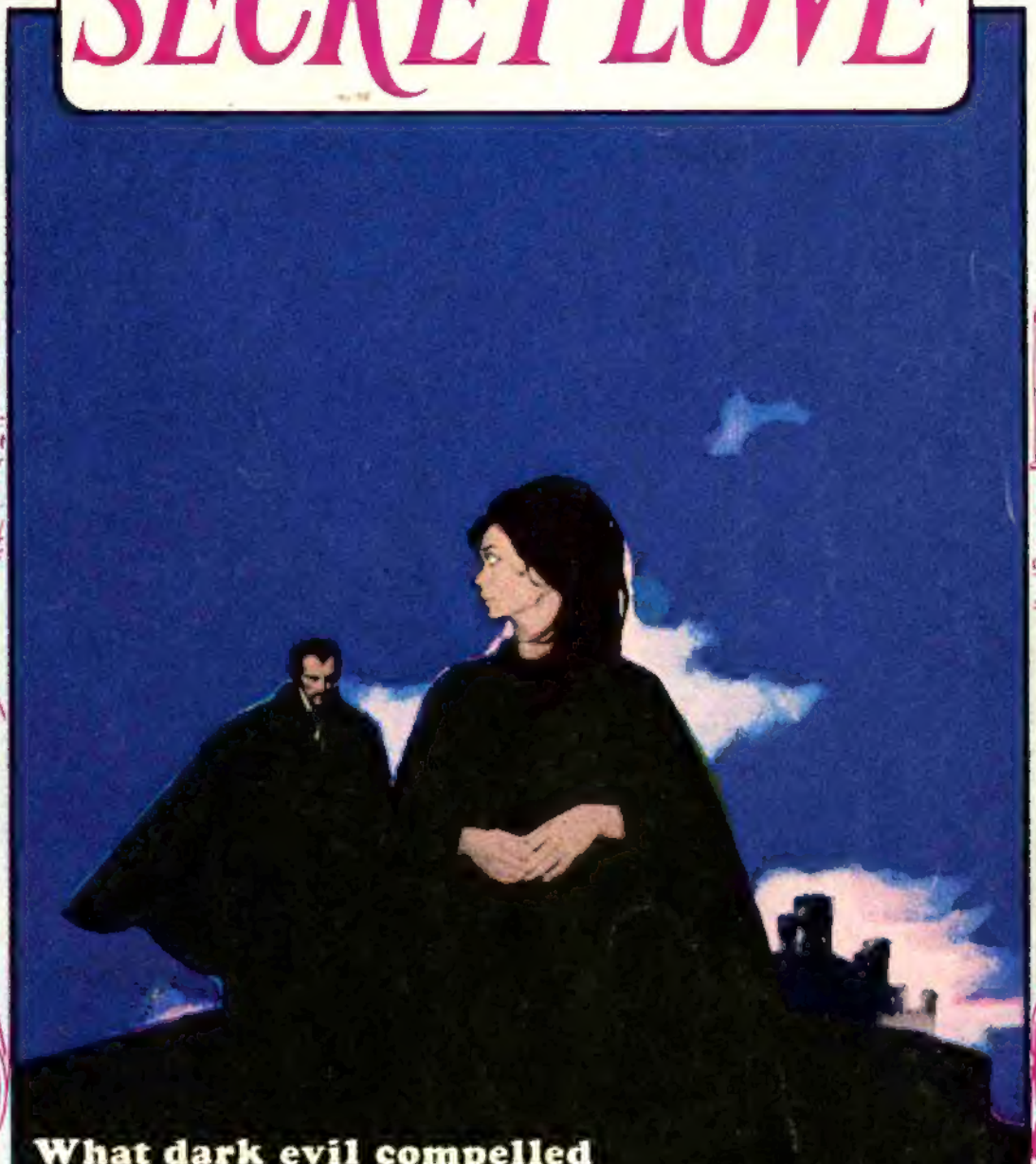

What dark evil compelled Sarah to renounce the man she loved and begin her perilous journey . . .

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A GRAPHIC NOVEL OF GOTHIC TERROR

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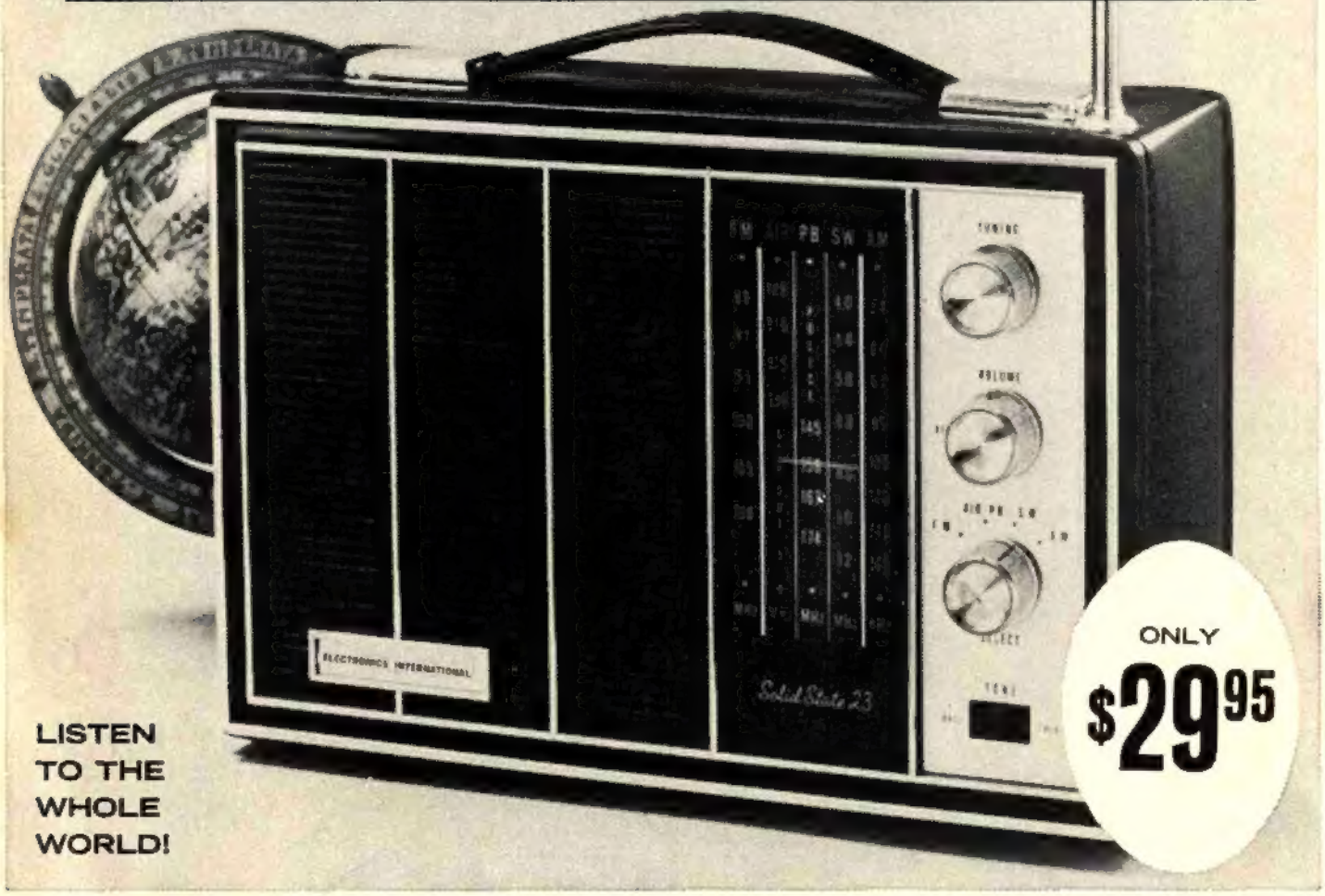

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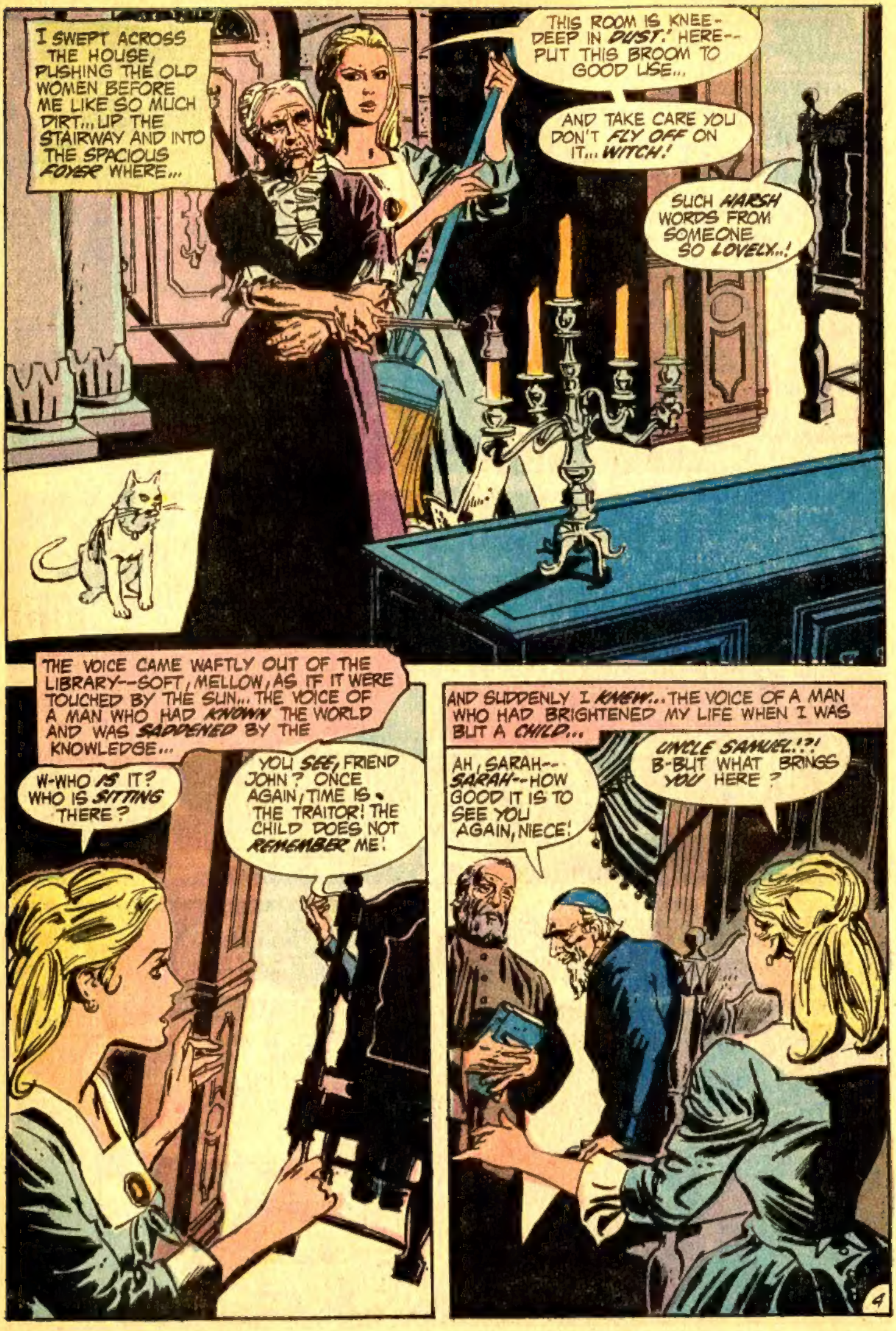
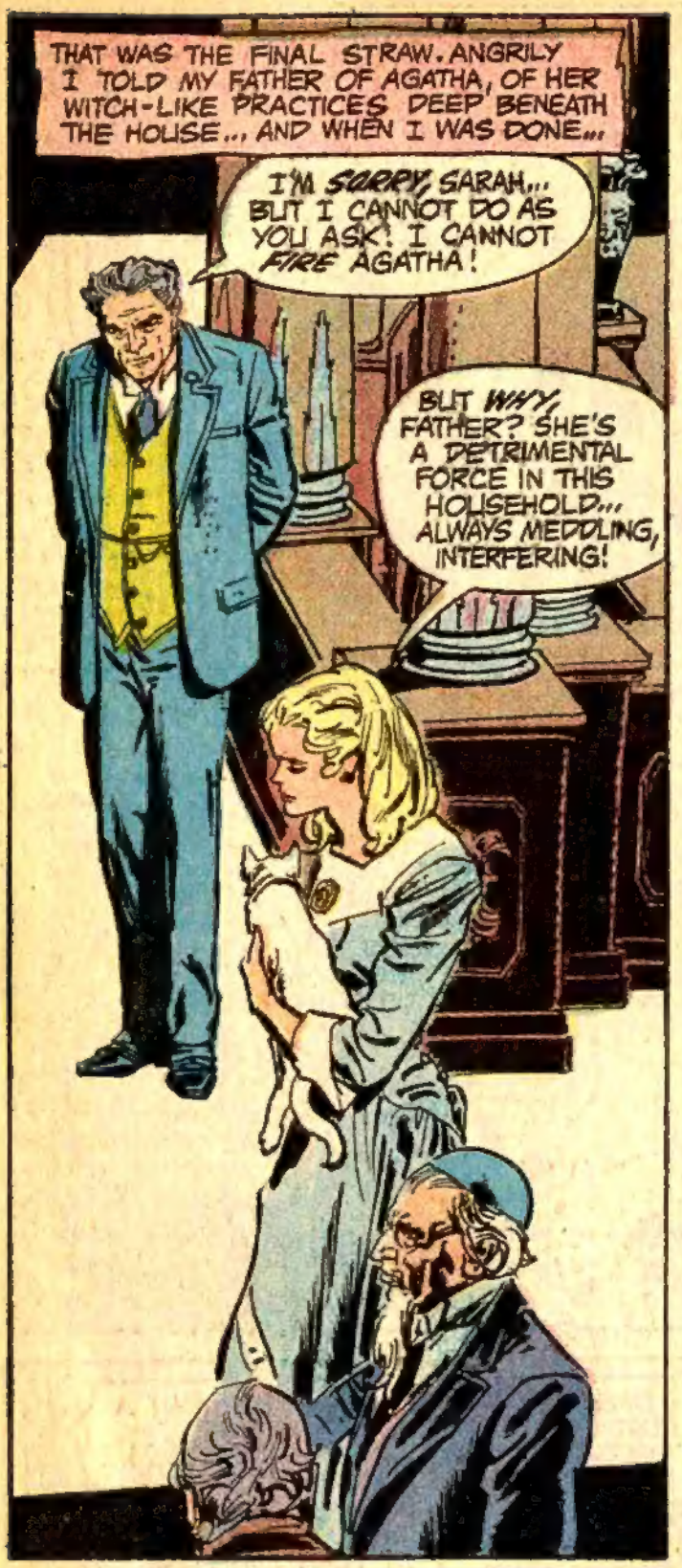
SHE'S DOWN HERE AGAIN... I *KNOW* SHE IS! PLAYING HER FOOLISH GAMES... MUTTERING HER INFANTILE CHANTS! WELL, I'LL SOON PUT A STOP TO *THAT!*
THE BASEMENTS BENEATH OUR OLD HOUSE WERE NOT UNLIKE *CATACOMBS*... LONG, TWISTING CORRIDORS LINED WITH HEAVY, OAKEN DOORS. IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO FIND THE RIGHT ONE...
HEAVEN ONLY KNOWS WHAT YOU MIGHT *FIND!*
THE BRIMSTONE SCENT COMES STRONGEST FROM *HERE!* I'LL...
TABBETA... *NO!* DON'T GO IN THERE *ALONE!*
BUT HEAVEN HAD LITTLE TO DO WITH WHAT I FOUND INSIDE... FOR THERE SHE STOOD... OLD *AGATHA*, MY FATHER'S DEAREST SERVANT-- CLOSE IN THE MIDDLE OF A FADING *PENTAGRAM*-- A SIGN OF THE MYSTIC ARTS...
MISTRESS SARAH... YE SHOULDN'T BE IN HERE! YE'LL INTERFERE WITH THE SPELL!
I'LL DO FAR MORE THAN *THAT*, YOU MINDLESS OLD CRONE!

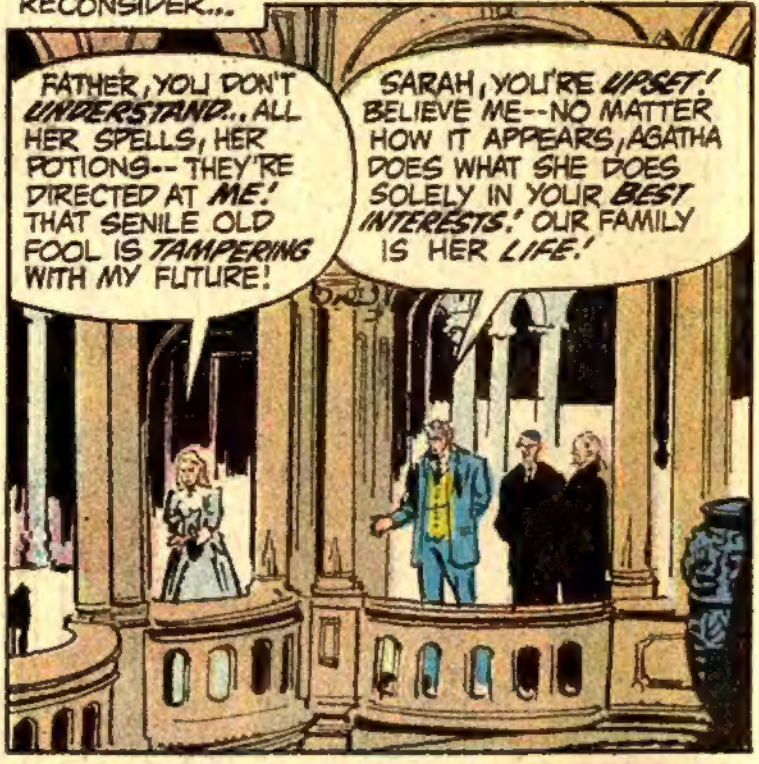
I STARED AT THE OLD WOMAN AND ANGER WELLED UP WITHIN ME... RAZOR-EDGED IMPATIENCE WITH HER "OLD COUNTRY" WAYS... I HAD HAD ABOUT ENOUGH...
MISTRESS SARAH... PLEASE! YE DON'T KNOW WHAT YE'RE DOING!
DON'T I, YOU WITLESS HAG? HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I WARNED YOU ABOUT THIS?
I'LL HAVE NONE OF YOUR WITCHCRAFT IN MY HOUSE!
SOFTLY, OLD AGATHA SPOKE-- AND THERE WAS A NOTE OF TROUBLED DESPERATION IN HER VOICE...
BUT, MISTRESS... I WAS DOING IT FOR YOU! TRYING TO SUMMON THE ELDER GODS TO HELP YE FIND YER OWN TRUE LOVE! YE MUST LET ME CONTINUE!
THAT'S NOT WHAT YOU'RE PAID FOR, OLD WOMAN! I CAN ATTEND TO MY ROMANTIC INTERESTS WITHOUT ANY ASSISTANCE FROM YOU!
MISTRESS SARAH... I BEG YOU...! I ONLY WANT TO CARE FOR YE-- LIKE THE DAUGHTER I NEVER HAD!
HER WORDS STUNG BITTERLY, AND FOR THE BRIEFEST MOMENT I FELT SOMEHOW PETTY... AS IF I WERE SLAPPING A HELPING HAND... THEN REALITY GRIPPED ME ONCE AGAIN AND I PRODDED HER TOWARDS THE STAIRS...
I'M NOT YOUR DAUGHTER, AGATHA... AND YOU'D DO WELL TO REMEMBER THAT!
YOU REMAIN IN THIS HOUSEHOLD AT MY FATHER'S REQUEST... AND FOR THAT REASON ALONE! HAD I MY WAY, YOU'D BE OUT IN THE STREET-- WHERE YOU BELONG!
3


I SWEPT ACROSS THE HOUSE, PUSHING THE OLD WOMEN BEFORE ME LIKE SO MUCH DIRT... UP THE STAIRWAY AND INTO THE SPACIOUS FOYER WHERE...
THIS ROOM IS KNEE-DEEP IN DUST! HERE-- PUT THIS BROOM TO GOOD USE...
AND TAKE CARE YOU DON'T FLY OFF ON IT... WITCH!
SUCH HARSH WORDS FROM SOMEONE SO LOVELY...!
THE VOICE CAME WAFTLY OUT OF THE LIBRARY--SOFT, MELLOW, AS IF IT WERE TOUCHED BY THE SUN... THE VOICE OF A MAN WHO HAD KNOWN THE WORLD AND WAS SADDENED BY THE KNOWLEDGE...
W-WHO IS IT? WHO IS SITTING THERE?
YOU SEE, FRIEND JOHN? ONCE AGAIN, TIME IS THE TRAITOR! THE CHILD DOES NOT REMEMBER ME!
AND SUDDENLY I KNEW... THE VOICE OF A MAN WHO HAD BRIGHTENED MY LIFE WHEN I WAS BUT A CHILD...
AH, SARAH-- SARAH--HOW GOOD IT IS TO SEE YOU AGAIN, NIECE!
UNCLE SAMUEL!?! B-BUT WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE?
4

A SUMMONS FROM YOUR FATHER, MY DEAR--BUT THERE IS TIME ENOUGH TO TALK OF THAT LATER ON!
RIGHT NOW I'D LIKE TO KNOW WHERE YOU DEVELOPED THAT TEMPER OF YOURS!
TEMPER, UNCLE SAMUEL? WHY... I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN!
I'M REFERRING TO THE WAY YOU TREATED THAT SERVANT WOMAN! THE FACT THAT SHE'S AN EMPLOYEE GIVES YOU NO RIGHT TO DEMEAN HER CHARACTER SO!
HER CHARACTER? DEAR UNCLE, YOU'VE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'RE DEFENDING!
THAT WOMAN IS A HERETIC-- A BELIEVER IN THE ANCIENT MYSTIC ARTS! SHE'S NOT FIT TO WALK THE STREETS WITH DECENT PEOPLE!
AND WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE, CHILD? FAITH IS AN OBJECT THAT TAKES COUNTLESS FORMS! WHO IS TO SAY IF ONE OF THEM IS ANY BETTER OR WORSE THAN THE NEXT?
I OPENED MY MOUTH TO ANSWER--BUT A SUDDEN SOUND CUT ME OFF--THE THROBBING TONES OF MY FATHER AS HE WALKED INTO THE ROOM...
SARAH, I'M SURPRISED AT YOU! YOUR UNCLE AND HIS COLLEAGUE HAVE TRAVELED A LONG WAY-- FAR TOO LONG TO LISTEN TO YOUR PETTY ANNOYANCES!
5



MY FATHER'S WORDS PIERCED MY HEART AS A SMOLDERING POKER LANCES THE FALLEN SNOW-- AND, DESPERATELY, I TRIED TO MAKE HIM RECONSIDER...



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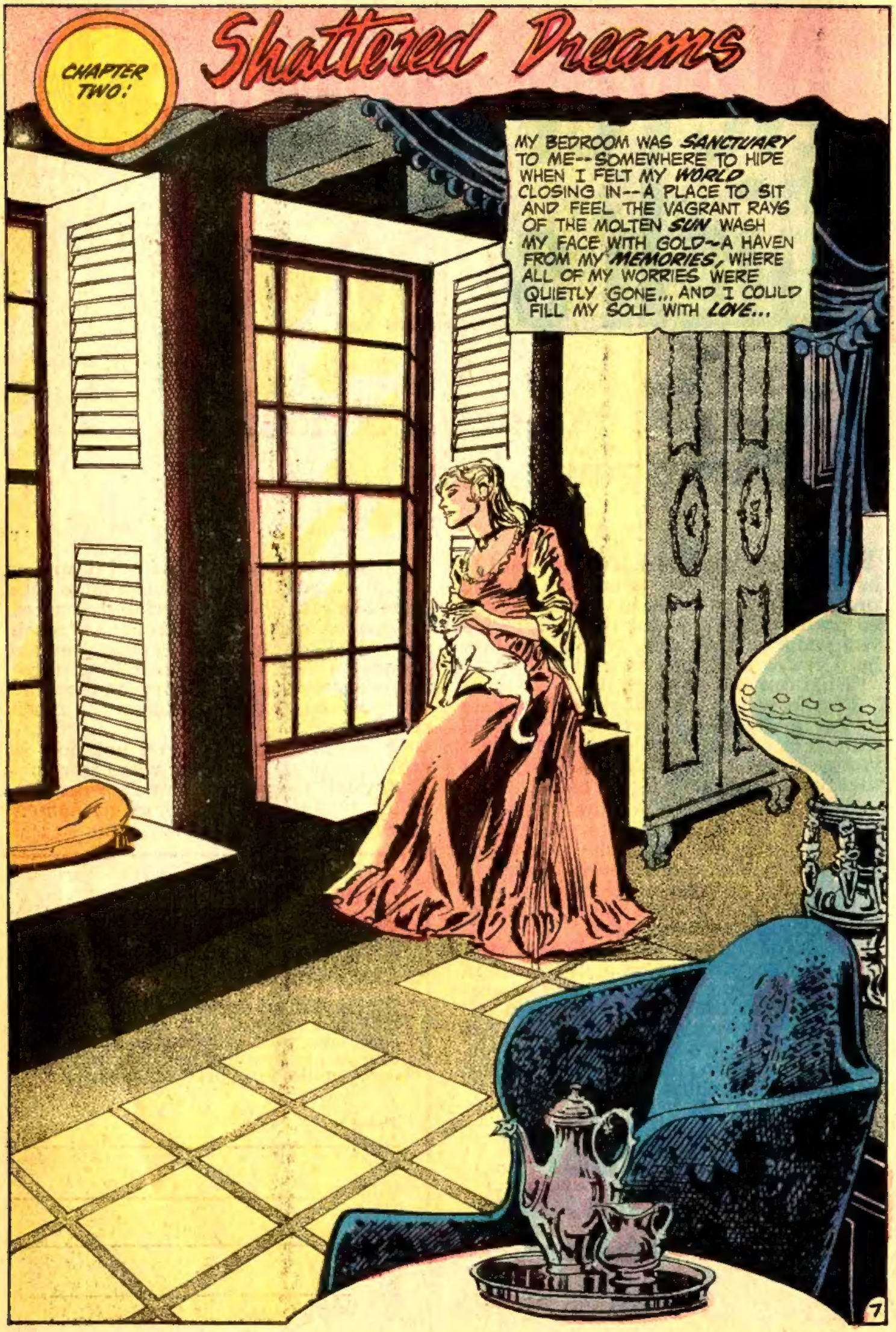
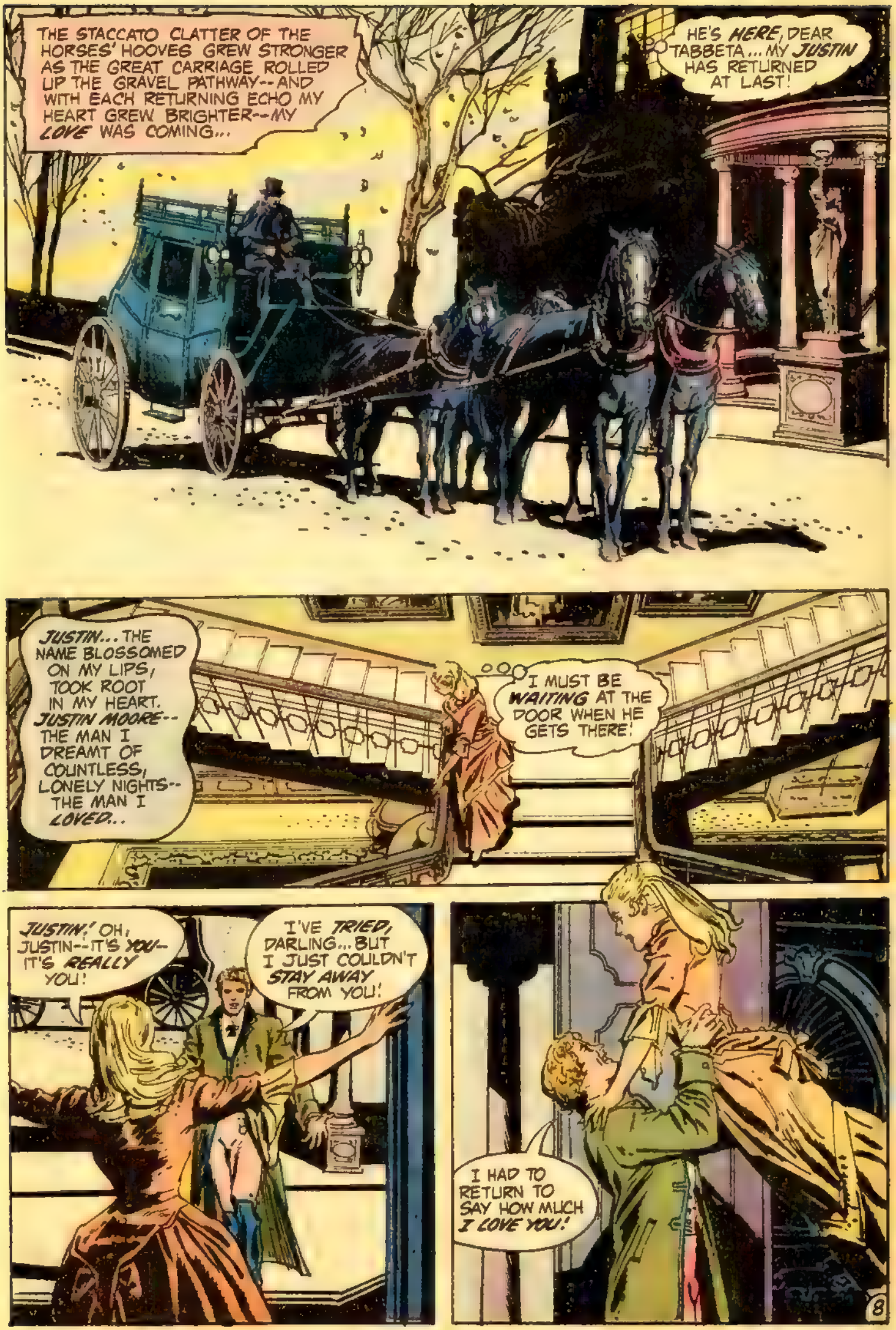
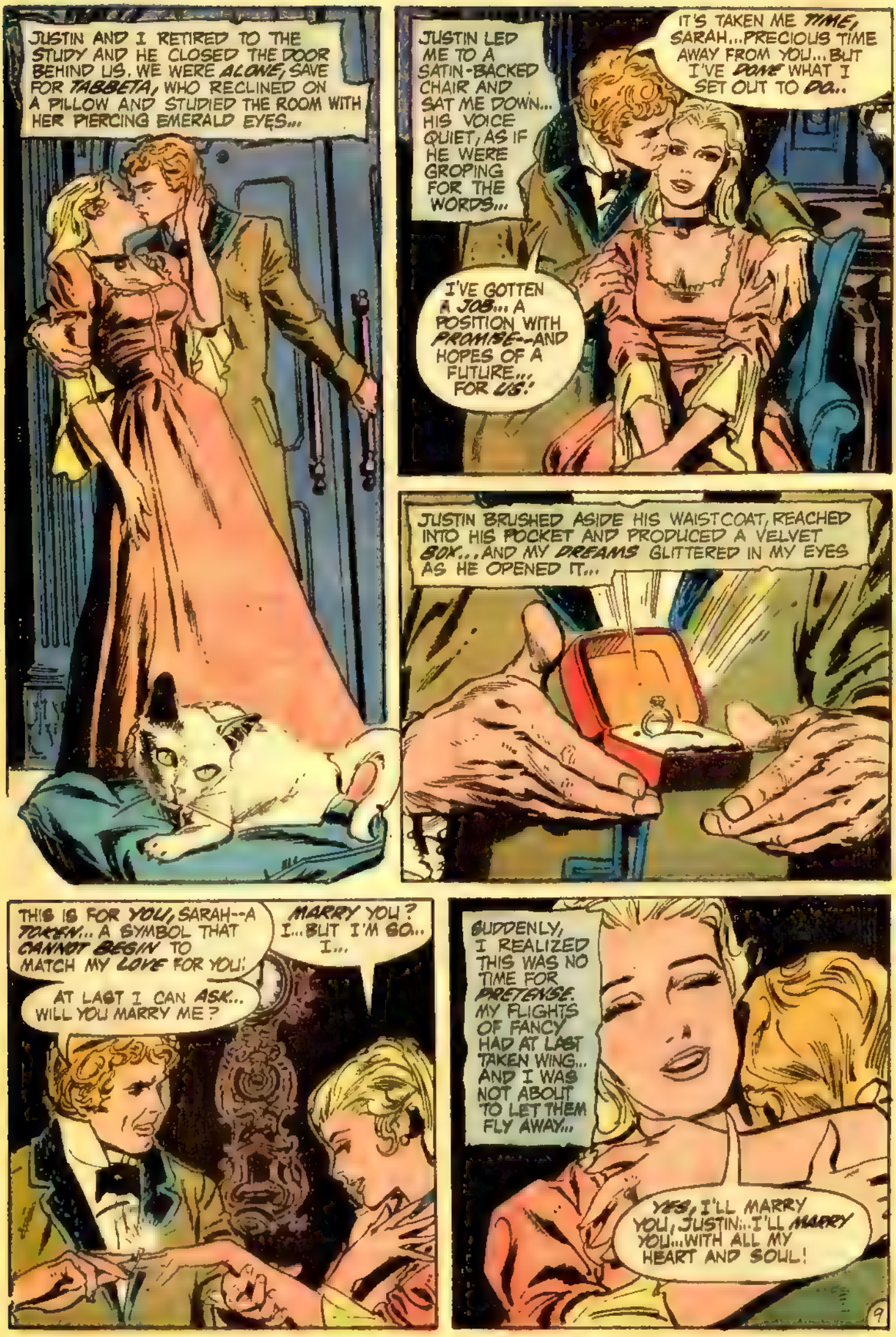
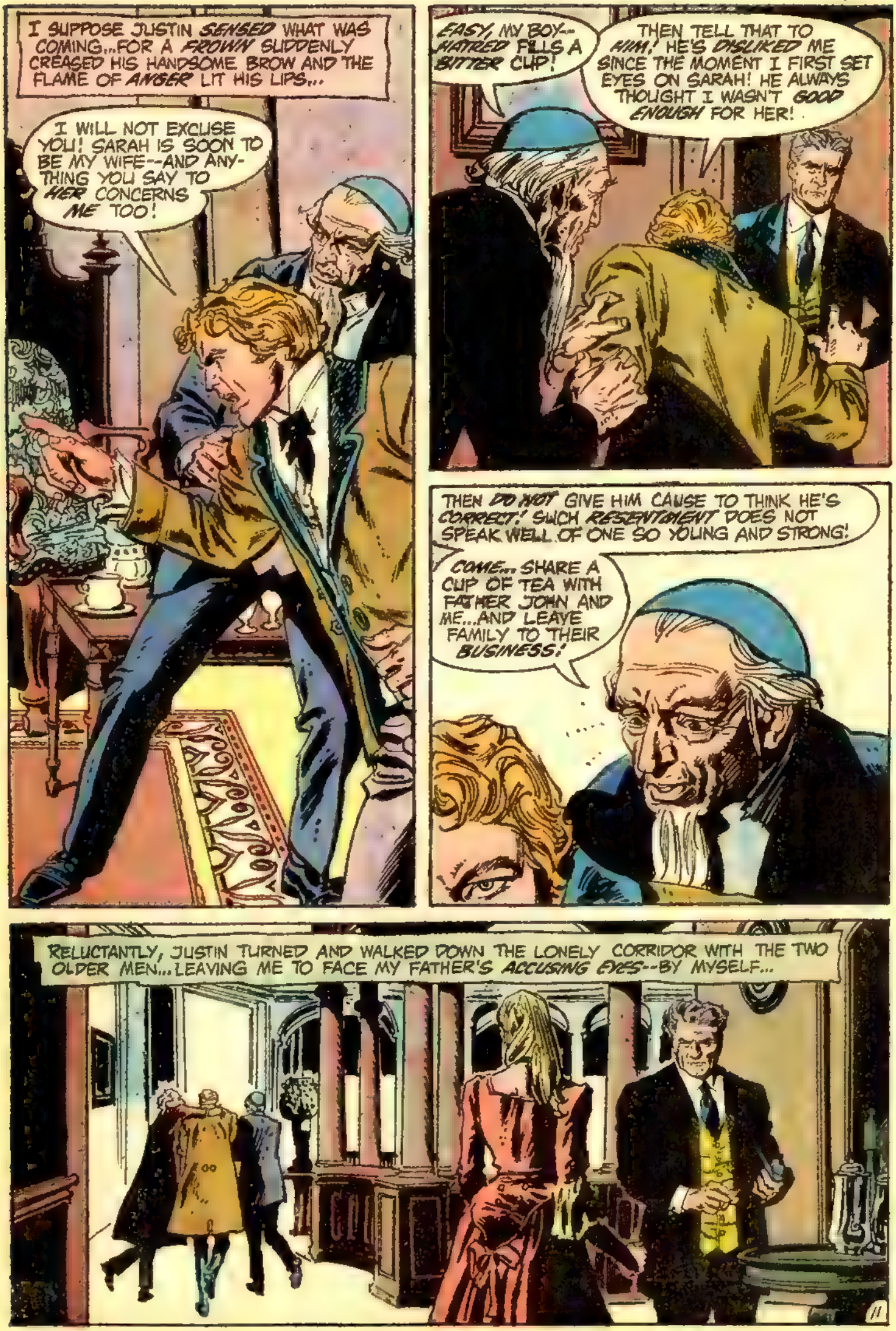
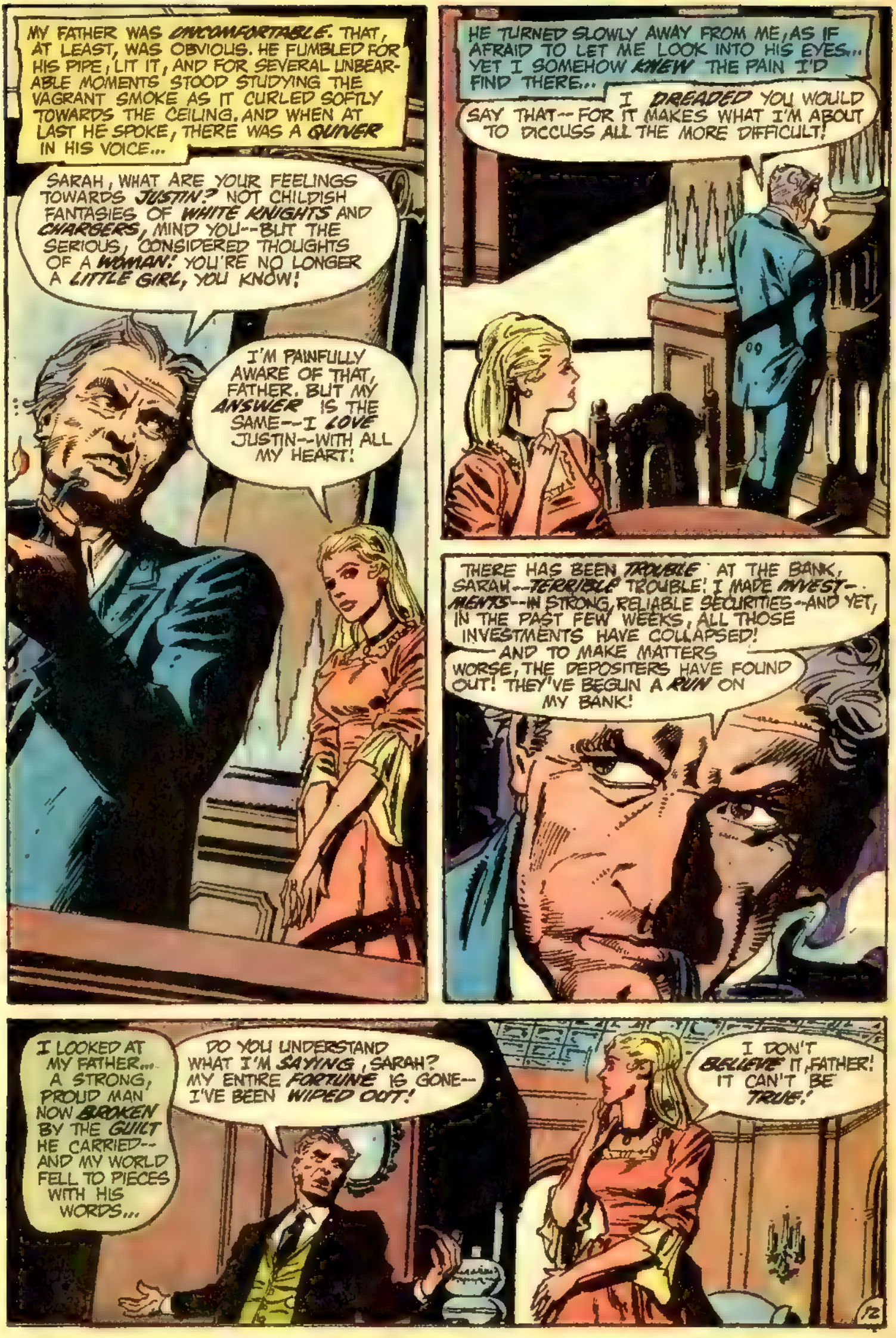

CHAPTER TWO:
Shattered Dreams
MY BEDROOM WAS SANCTUARY TO ME--SOMEWHERE TO HIDE WHEN I FELT MY WORLD CLOSING IN--A PLACE TO SIT AND FEEL THE VAGRANT RAYS OF THE MOLTEN SUN WASH MY FACE WITH GOLD--A HAVEN FROM MY MEMORIES, WHERE ALL OF MY WORRIES WERE QUIETLY GONE... AND I COULD FILL MY SOUL WITH LOVE...
7


THE STACCATO CLATTER OF THE HORSES' HOOVES GREW STRONGER AS THE GREAT CARRIAGE ROLLED UP THE GRAVEL PATHWAY--AND WITH EACH RETURNING ECHO MY HEART GREW BRIGHTER--MY LOVE WAS COMING...
HE'S HERE, DEAR TABBETA... MY JUSTIN HAS RETURNED AT LAST!
JUSTIN... THE NAME BLOSSOMED ON MY LIPS, TOOK ROOT IN MY HEART. JUSTIN MOORE-- THE MAN I DREAMT OF COUNTLESS, LONELY NIGHTS-- THE MAN I LOVED...
I MUST BE WAITING AT THE DOOR WHEN HE GETS THERE!
JUSTIN! OH, JUSTIN--IT'S YOU-- IT'S REALLY YOU!
I'VE TRIED, DARLING... BUT I JUST COULDN'T STAY AWAY FROM YOU!
I HAD TO RETURN TO SAY HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU!


JUSTIN AND I RETIRED TO THE STUDY AND HE CLOSED THE DOOR BEHIND US. WE WERE ALONE, SAVE FOR TABBETA, WHO RECLINED ON A PILLOW AND STUDIED THE ROOM WITH HER PIERCING EMERALD EYES...
JUSTIN LED ME TO A SATIN-BACKED CHAIR AND SAT ME DOWN... HIS VOICE QUIET, AS IF HE WERE GROPING FOR THE WORDS...
IT'S TAKEN ME TIME, SARAH...PRECIOUS TIME AWAY FROM YOU...BUT I'VE DONE WHAT I SET OUT TO DO..
I'VE GOTTEN A JOB... A POSITION WITH PROMISE--AND HOPES OF A FUTURE... FOR US!
JUSTIN BRUSHED ASIDE HIS WAISTCOAT, REACHED INTO HIS POCKET AND PRODUCED A VELVET BOX...AND MY DREAMS GLITTERED IN MY EYES AS HE OPENED IT...
THIS IS FOR YOU, SARAH--A TOKEN... A SYMBOL THAT CANNOT BEGIN TO MATCH MY LOVE FOR YOU!
AT LAST I CAN ASK... WILL YOU MARRY ME?
MARRY YOU? I...BUT I'M SO... I...
SUDDENLY, I REALIZED THIS WAS NO TIME FOR PRETENSE. MY FLIGHTS OF FANCY HAD AT LAST TAKEN WING... AND I WAS NOT ABOUT TO LET THEM FLY AWAY...
YES, I'LL MARRY YOU, JUSTIN...I'LL MARRY YOU...WITH ALL MY HEART AND SOUL!
9

OUR HEARTS SOARING, WE WENT TO ASK MY FATHER'S PERMISSION--BUT THE THICK, UNCOMFORTABLE MOOD THAT FILLED THE AIR OF THE ANTIQUE DRAWING ROOM QUICKLY BROUGHT OUR MINDS DOWN FROM THE CLOUDS AND INTO THE SEA OF HARSH REALITY...
FATHER? JUSTIN AND I HAVE SOMETHING WE WISH TO SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT!
ALMOST BEFORE I SPOKE, I KNEW THIS WAS NEITHER THE TIME NOR PLACE...BUT THE MOMENTUM OF THE OCCASION CARRIED ME FORWARD UNTIL I STRUCK A WALL OF COLD SOBRIETY...
AND I IN TURN, SARAH, HAVE SOMETHING I WOULD LIKE TO SAY TO YOU... IN PRIVATE!
IF YOU'LL KINDLY EXCUSE US, JUSTIN...?
10


I SUPPOSE JUSTIN SENSED WHAT WAS COMING...FOR A FROWN SUDDENLY CREASED HIS HANDSOME BROW AND THE FLAME OF ANGER LIT HIS LIPS...
I WILL NOT EXCUSE YOU! SARAH IS SOON TO BE MY WIFE--AND ANY-THING YOU SAY TO HER CONCERNS ME TOO!
EASY, MY BOY--HATRED FILLS A BITTER CUP!
THEN TELL THAT TO HIM! HE'S DISLIKED ME SINCE THE MOMENT I FIRST SET EYES ON SARAH! HE ALWAYS THOUGHT I WASN'T GOOD ENOUGH FOR HER!
THEN DO NOT GIVE HIM CAUSE TO THINK HE'S CORRECT! SUCH RESENTMENT DOES NOT SPEAK WELL OF ONE SO YOUNG AND STRONG!
COME... SHARE A CUP OF TEA WITH FATHER JOHN AND ME...AND LEAVE FAMILY TO THEIR BUSINESS!
RELUCTANTLY, JUSTIN TURNED AND WALKED DOWN THE LONELY CORRIDOR WITH THE TWO OLDER MEN...LEAVING ME TO FACE MY FATHER'S ACCUSING EYES--BY MYSELF...


MY FATHER WAS UNCOMFORTABLE. THAT, AT LEAST, WAS OBVIOUS. HE FUMBLED FOR HIS PIPE, LIT IT, AND FOR SEVERAL UNBEARABLE MOMENTS STOOD STUDYING THE VAGRANT SMOKE AS IT CURLED SOFTLY TOWARDS THE CEILING. AND WHEN AT LAST HE SPOKE, THERE WAS A QUIVER IN HIS VOICE...
SARAH, WHAT ARE YOUR FEELINGS TOWARDS JUSTIN? NOT CHILDISH FANTASIES OF WHITE KNIGHTS AND CHARGERS, MIND YOU--BUT THE SERIOUS, CONSIDERED THOUGHTS OF A WOMAN! YOU'RE NO LONGER A LITTLE GIRL, YOU KNOW!
I'M PAINFULLY AWARE OF THAT, FATHER. BUT MY ANSWER IS THE SAME--I LOVE JUSTIN--WITH ALL MY HEART!
HE TURNED SLOWLY AWAY FROM ME, AS IF AFRAID TO LET ME LOOK INTO HIS EYES... YET I SOMEHOW KNEW THE PAIN I'D FIND THERE...
I DREADED YOU WOULD SAY THAT--FOR IT MAKES WHAT I'M ABOUT TO DISCUSS ALL THE MORE DIFFICULT!
THERE HAS BEEN TROUBLE AT THE BANK, SARAH--TERRIBLE TROUBLE! I MADE INVESTMENTS--IN STRONG, RELIABLE SECURITIES--AND YET, IN THE PAST FEW WEEKS, ALL THOSE INVESTMENTS HAVE COLLAPSED!
AND TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, THE DEPOSITERS HAVE FOUND OUT! THEY'VE BEGUN A RUN ON MY BANK!
I LOOKED AT MY FATHER... A STRONG, PROUD MAN NOW BROKEN BY THE GUILT HE CARRIED--AND MY WORLD FELL TO PIECES WITH HIS WORDS...
DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING, SARAH? MY ENTIRE FORTUNE IS GONE--I'VE BEEN WIPED OUT!
I DON'T BELIEVE IT, FATHER! IT CAN'T BE TRUE!
12

A GLAZED VEIL FELL ACROSS MY FATHER'S EYES AND HE RUSHED TO ME, HIS HANDS CLUTCHING DESPERATELY AT MY SHOULDERS...
OH, DAUGHTER, CURSE ME FOR THE FOOL I AM, BUT IT IS TRUE...
AND YOU ARE MY ONLY HOPE OF SALVATION!
THERE IS A MAN... BARON LUTHER DUMONT--WHO HAS SEEN YOU AT THE BANK AND FALLEN IN LOVE WITH YOU FROM AFAR! HE COULD SUPPLY SUFFICIENT FUNDS TO SET THE BANK ON ITS FEET AGAIN! AND ALL HE ASKS IN RETURN IS... YOUR HAND IN MARRIAGE!
MERCIFUL HEAVEN, FATHER... YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE ASKING!
I KNOW OF NOTHING ELSE! I'M ASKING YOU TO SAVE YOUR FATHER'S LIFE!
SAVE YOUR LIFE AT THE SACRIFICE OF MY OWN? HOW CAN YOU PUT ME IN THIS POSITION? WHAT ABOUT JUSTIN... THE MAN I LOVE?
I ASK THIS BECAUSE I HAVE NO CHOICE! YOU'LL FORGET ABOUT JUSTIN IN TIME!
3

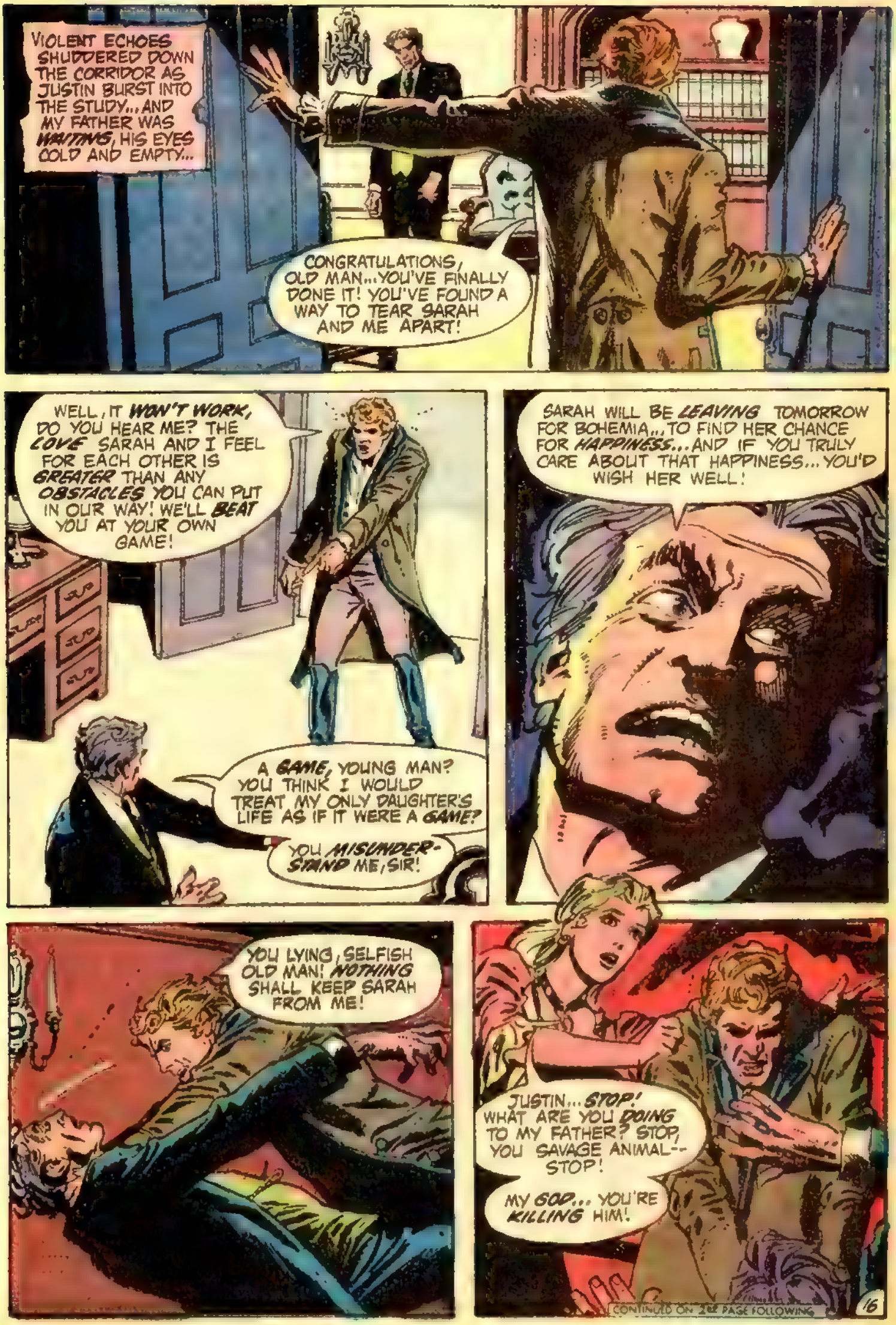
THEN THE IRONY OF IT ALL STRUCK ME... AND IF IT HADN'T BEEN SO VERY PATHETIC, I'D HAVE BEEN SORELY TEMPTED TO LAUGH...
FATHER, I CAME DOWN TO TELL YOU I WAS GETTING MARRIED... NOW YOU ASK ME TO GO OFF AND NEVER SEE MY BELOVED AGAIN! HOW COULD YOU?
BELIEVE ME, SARAH --I DO WHAT I DO FOR YOUR GOOD FAR MORE THAN MINE!
IT WAS FRIGHTENING TO WATCH MY FATHER LIKE THAT... LIKE A CAGED ANIMAL BACKED AGAINST A WALL, SEARCHING FOR SOMEWHERE TO TURN...
WHAT COULD JUSTIN GIVE YOU? A COLD WATER FLAT? A FEW PALTRY SHILLINGS A MONTH?
HE COULD GIVE ME LOVE, FATHER!
BUT LOVE ISN'T ENOUGH! I'M OFFERING YOU SECURITY-- A WARM ROOF OVER YOUR HEAD--ALL THE THINGS YOU'RE ACCUSTOMED TO... AND A MAN TO LOVE YOU AS WELL--AS YOU'LL GROW TO LOVE HIM! YOU MUST ACCEPT, DAUGHTER-- FOR YOURSELF AS WELL AS ME! BOTH OUR LIVES DEPEND ON IT!
I STOOD FOR A MOMENT, MY FINGERS TRACING THE GRANITE GRANDEUR OF THE STATUE BEFORE ME, AND AS I MET MY FATHER'S TORTURED GAZE...
ALL RIGHT, FATHER... I'LL MARRY YOUR BARON!
14

TEARS TRACKED ACROSS MY FACE AS I RAN FROM THE HOUSE... FROM THE NOW UNBEARABLE PRESENCE OF MY FATHER... WHO, IN ONE BRIEF MOMENT, HAD TORN TO RIBBONS THE TENDER TAPESTRY OF MY LIFE...
JUSTIN... HE'LL BE WAITING FOR ME IN THE GARDEN! PLEASE, DEAR GOD... LET HIM UNDERSTAND WHAT I MUST TELL HIM! PLEASE DON'T LET HIM HATE ME!

HE WAS STANDING WHERE I KNEW HE WOULD BE... AMONG THE GNARLED AND TWISTING BRANCHES THAT STILL SHED THEIR SUMMER SKIN--AND THERE WAS A LOOK OF DEEP CONCERN MIRRORED IN HIS SHINING EYES...
WHAT IS IT, SARAH? WHAT'S WRONG? DIDN'T YOU TELL HIM ABOUT US?
JUSTIN... OH, JUSTIN... I DON'T KNOW HOW TO BEGIN...

BUT I FOUND A WAY... AND WHEN I FINISHED BLURTING OUT THE WHOLE SORRY STORY...
...BUT MAYBE IT ISN'T THE END, DARLING! PERHAPS WE CAN STILL SEE ONE ANOTHER IF WE...
ENOUGH, SARAH! STAY HERE! THERE IS SOMETHING I MUST DO!

WITH SUDDEN ANGER, JUSTIN RAN TOWARD THE SLOWLY GRAYING OLD HOUSE... AND THE AIR WAS SUDDENLY CHARGED WITH A FEELING OF IMPENDING DOOM...


VIOLENT ECHOES SHUDDERED DOWN THE CORRIDOR AS JUSTIN BURST INTO THE STUDY... AND MY FATHER WAS WAITING, HIS EYES COLD AND EMPTY...
CONGRATULATIONS, OLD MAN... YOU'VE FINALLY DONE IT! YOU'VE FOUND A WAY TO TEAR SARAH AND ME APART!
WELL, IT WON'T WORK, DO YOU HEAR ME? THE LOVE SARAH AND I FEEL FOR EACH OTHER IS GREATER THAN ANY OBSTACLES YOU CAN PUT IN OUR WAY! WE'LL BEAT YOU AT YOUR OWN GAME!
A GAME, YOUNG MAN? YOU THINK I WOULD TREAT MY ONLY DAUGHTER'S LIFE AS IF IT WERE A GAME?
YOU MISUNDER-STAND ME, SIR!
SARAH WILL BE LEAVING TOMORROW FOR BOHEMIA... TO FIND HER CHANCE FOR HAPPINESS... AND IF YOU TRULY CARE ABOUT THAT HAPPINESS... YOU'D WISH HER WELL!
YOU LYING, SELFISH OLD MAN! NOTHING SHALL KEEP SARAH FROM ME!
JUSTIN... STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO MY FATHER? STOP, YOU SAVAGE ANIMAL-- STOP!
MY GOD... YOU'RE KILLING HIM!
CONTINUED ON 2ND PAGE FOLLOWING
16

You can win a trip to the Indy 500, and bring your Dad along, too!

I'm Dan Gurney. And I want to tell you that MPC has got a great contest going. We call it the MPC 500 Kit Idea Contest.

Draw your idea of an original model car . . . a car of your own design. You don't have to draw like a professional. It can be any kind of car, from street to show to racing to buggy to custom to wild. Do it now! You may just win one of 12 expense-paid trips to Indy for you and Dad.

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Sound terrific? You bet it is. Get your entry blank, with rules, in any MPC 1972 New Car Kit at your nearest hobby shop or department store. Look for the MPC 500 flag on the box. Contest closes January 31, 1972. See you at Indy!

of the FUN GROUP

ONLY $1.00

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Just ADD WATER — that's ALL! In ONE SECOND your AMAZING Sea-Monkeys **actually COME TO LIFE!** Yes, they hatch **instantly,** right before your eyes! Now, simply grow and enjoy the most adorable pets ever to bring smiles, laughter and fun into your home.

SO EAGER TO PLEASE, THEY CAN EVEN BE TRAINED

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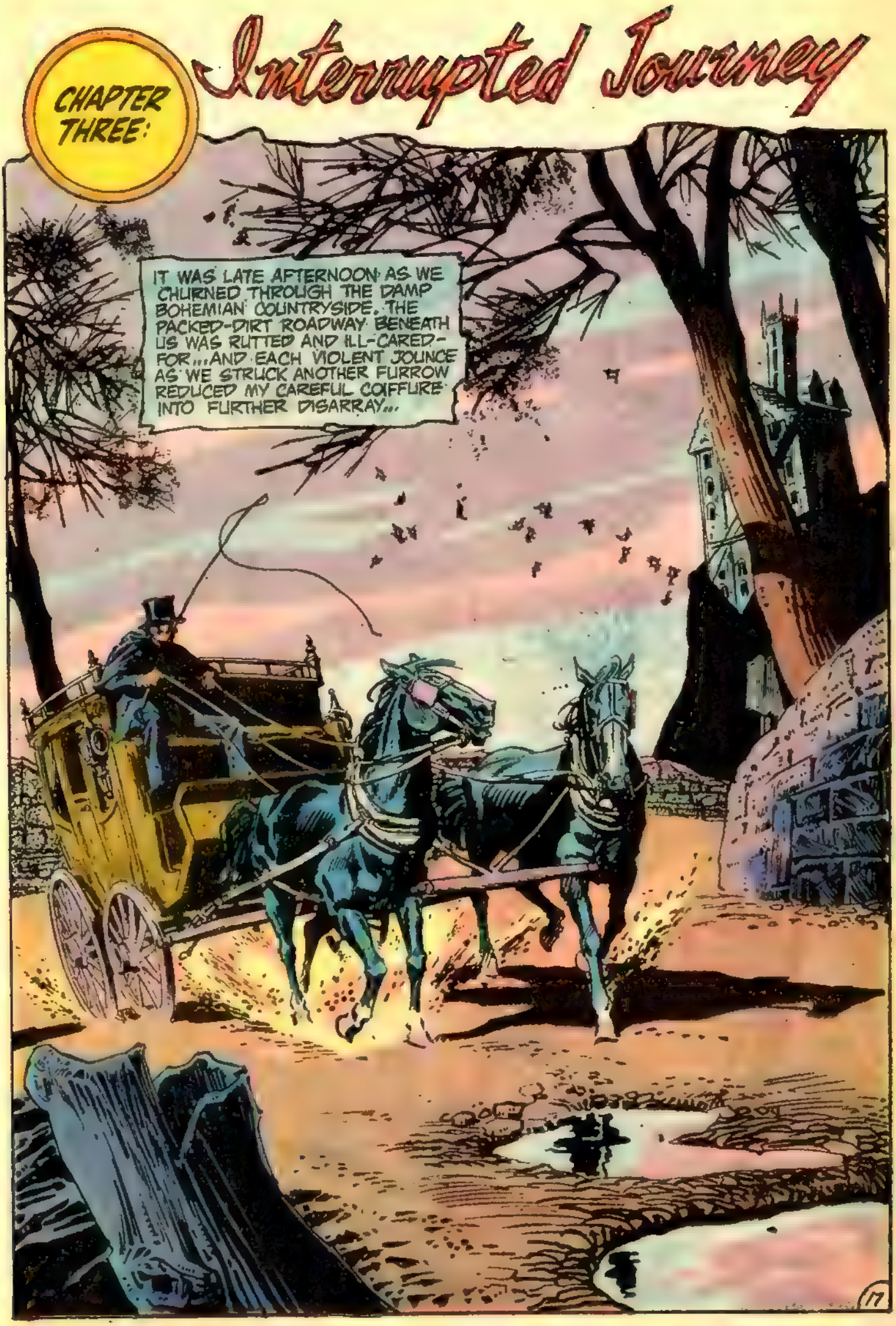
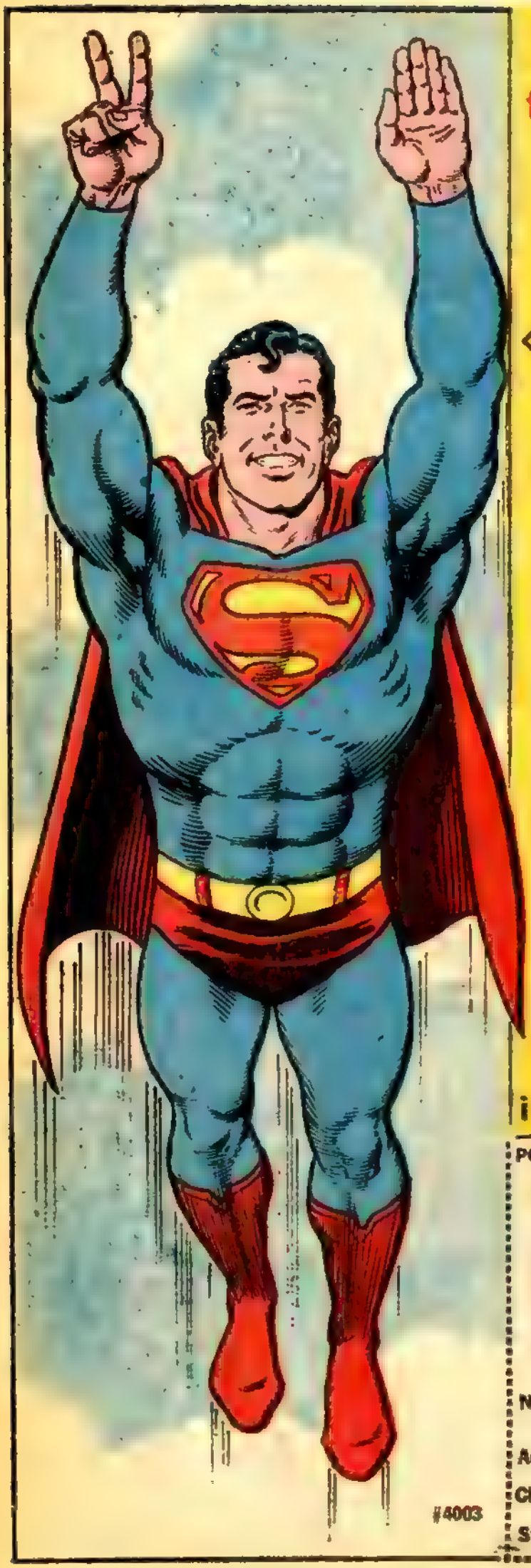

CHAPTER THREE:
Interrupted Journey
IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON AS WE CHURNED THROUGH THE DAMP BOHEMIAN COUNTRYSIDE. THE PACKED-DIRT ROADWAY BENEATH US WAS RUTTED AND ILL-CARED-FOR... AND EACH VIOLENT JOUNCE AS WE STRUCK ANOTHER FURROW REDUCED MY CAREFUL COIFFURE INTO FURTHER DISARRAY...
17

BUT THE CLAMOROUS CLATTER OF THE WHIRLING CARRIAGE WHEELS WAS AS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE PERSISTANT DRONING THAT BUZZED IN MY HEAD...
ENOUGH, AGATHA...YOUR CONSTANT CHATTER BEGINS TO WEAR THIN UPON MY EARS! I'LL HAVE NO MORE OF IT!
BUT, MISTRESS SARAH... I TRY ONLY TO EASE YER BURDEN...ONLY TO CONVINCE YE THAT YE DID THE RIGHT THING!
I'D HAVE NEVER BROUGHT YOU WITH ME HAD MY FATHER NOT DEMANDED IT!
THE RIGHT THING, AGATHA? MAYBE--!
AH, BUT YE DID, MISTRESS... THAT JUSTIN WASN'T THE PROPER MAN FOR YE, TO BEGIN WITH! LOSING HIM WAS A BLESSING!
ONCE I WOULD HAVE LEAPED UPON AGATHA AND SCRATCHED HER EYES OUT FOR SAYING SUCH A THING, BUT NOW-- NOW I WONDERED...
PERHAPS YOU SPEAK THE TRUTH, AGATHA! I NEVER REALIZED JUSTIN HAD SUCH A VIOLENT TEMPER...
ALL OF HIS KIND DO! THEY'RE ROGUES AND RASCALS EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM --VILLAINS WHO SEEK OUT INNOCENTS LIKE YERSELF FOR THEIR OWN EVIL ENDS! Y'ER WELL RID OF HIM!
YES, I SUPPOSE SO! IF I HADN'T PULLED HIM FREE OF MY FATHER'S THROAT... JUSTIN MIGHT WELL HAVE KILLED HIM!
AYE, MISTRESS SARAH-- PERHAPS IT WAS UNWISE THAT YER BLESSED FATHER LET HIM GO OFF SCOT-FREE! SUCH MEN ARE DANGEROUS!
AGATHA PEERED AT ME DEEPLY... AND THERE WAS SOMETHING COLD AND CONTENTED IN HER WITHERED EYES AS SHE SPOKE...
AYE, MISTRESS--THERE ARE FAR BETTER MATES TO BE HAD FOR ONE SO FAIR AS YE!
18

BEFORE I COULD PONDER THE WEIGHT OF AGATHA'S WORDS, THERE WAS A SICKENING, SNAPPING JOLT... AND THE CARRIAGE HOBBLED TO A HALT...
KRUUMF
DUSTING OFF MY ENSEMBLE, I LEANED ANGRILY OUT OF THE WINDOW AND...
WELL, DRIVER... WHAT IS IT NOW? YOU'VE BEEN DRIVING THIS CARRIAGE AS IF IT CONTAINED FREIGHT INSTEAD OF PASSENGERS!
FORGIVE ME, MISTRESS... I FEAR WE'VE LOST A WHEEL!
DARKNESS HAD BEGUN TO SETTLE AROUND US AS THE DRIVER STRUGGLED TO REPAIR THE DAMAGE. SUDDENLY, TWO BLACK SHADOWS DETATCHED THEMSELVES FROM THE TWILIGHT AND THUNDERED UP BEFORE US...
EVENIN', DRIVER! FERGIVE THE INTRUSION-- BUT I'M AFEARED ME MATE AND I IS HERE TO ROB YE! IF THE LADIES'D BE SO KIND AS TO STEP DOWN FROM THE CARRIAGE...?
THIEVES! BRIGANDS! YOU SHAN'T TOUCH A HAIR OF THEIR HEADS AS LONG AS I LIVE TO STOP YOU!
THAT, ME FRIEND, IS A PROBLEM THAT IS EASILY SOLVED!
CRACK
19

THE DRIVER CRUMPLED TO THE DIRT AND, LAUGHING, THE TWO HIGHWAYMEN SET UPON OUR LUGGAGE, SCATTERING THE CONTENTS ALL ABOUT... THEN ONE OF THEM RIPPED OPEN THE CARRIAGE DOOR AND...
PRETTY POSSESSIONS FOR A PRETTY MAID!
COME HERE, WOMAN... AN' LET ME GET A BETTER LOOK AT YE!
DON'T YE TOUCH HER!
I STOOD STUNNED AS WIZENED OLD AGATHA LEAPED FROM THE COACH AND HURTLED HERSELF AT MY ATTACKER... HER GNARLED FINGERS REACHING, STRETCHING TO CLAW AT HIS EYES...
SCOUNDREL!
FILTH! DON'T YE EVER DARE TO LAY YER GRIMY HANDS UPON MY MISTRESS!
THERE WAS NO HUMOR IN THE BANDIT'S EYES AS HE THRUST THE OLD WOMAN AWAY FROM HIM. THE PISTOL IN HIS HAND SPAT SMOKE AND FLAME... AND AGATHA JOINED THE DRIVER IN THE DUST...
BDAM
FOR ONE BRIEF INSTANT, THEIR GAZE WAS NOT UPON ME AS THEY STUDIED THE SPRAWLED FORMS--AND THAT SINGLE INSTANT WAS TIME ENOUGH FOR ME TO-- FLEE...
WHAT...? YE TREACHEROUS WENCH... COME BACK HERE!
20

MY HEART POUNDED IN MY THROAT AS I RACED TOWARD THE CONCEALING WOODS THAT BORDERED THE ROAD. BEHIND ME, THE BANDIT DREW CLOSER... SO CLOSE THAT I COULD HEAR HIS BREATH HEAVING IN HIS CHEST...
AND NOW WHERE WOULD YE BE GOIN', ME PRETTY? OUR BUSINESS IS FAR FROM DONE!
OH, GOD-- NOOOO!
HIS FINGERS TANGLED IN MY HAIR AND, SLOWLY, THE VICIOUS HIGHWAYMAN FORCED MY MOUTH CLOSER, EVER CLOSER, TO HIS... THEN THE NIGHT EXPLODED BEHIND ME...
CRACK
ONE BRIGAND LAY SPRAWLED IN THE MUD LIKE A BROKEN RAG DOLL! THE OTHER WHIRLED, HIS PISTOL RAISED READY IN HIS HAND... AND HE QUICKLY FOLLOWED HIS PARTNER INTO HELL...
BDOW
I, TOO, LAY ON THE GROUND, MY LUNGS BURNING IN SILENT RELIEF. POLISHED BOOTS APPEARED BEFORE ME, THEIR PRESENCE FORCING ME TO LIFT MY EYES TO BEHOLD THE MAN WHO WORE THEM-- TALL, GRIM, WITH EYES THAT SEEMED TO GLOW IN THE DARKNESS...
YOU ARE SAFE, MISS! THEY SHALL NEVER BOTHER ANYONE... EVER AGAIN!
CONTINUED ON 3RD PAGE FOLLOWING.
21



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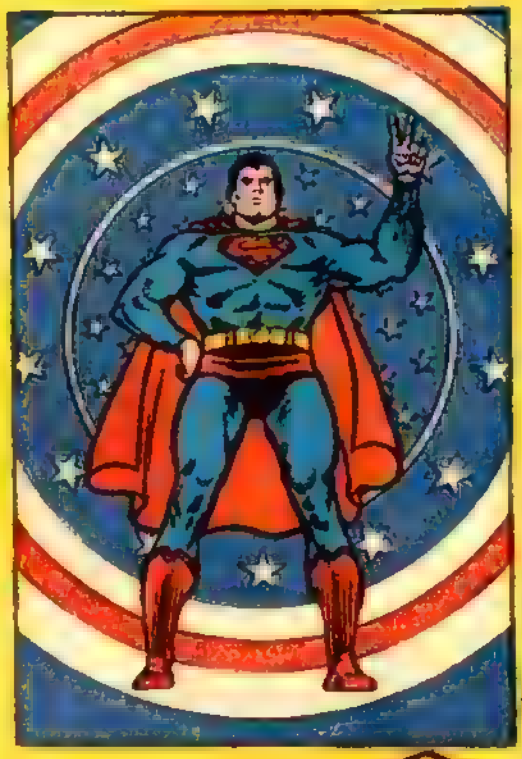

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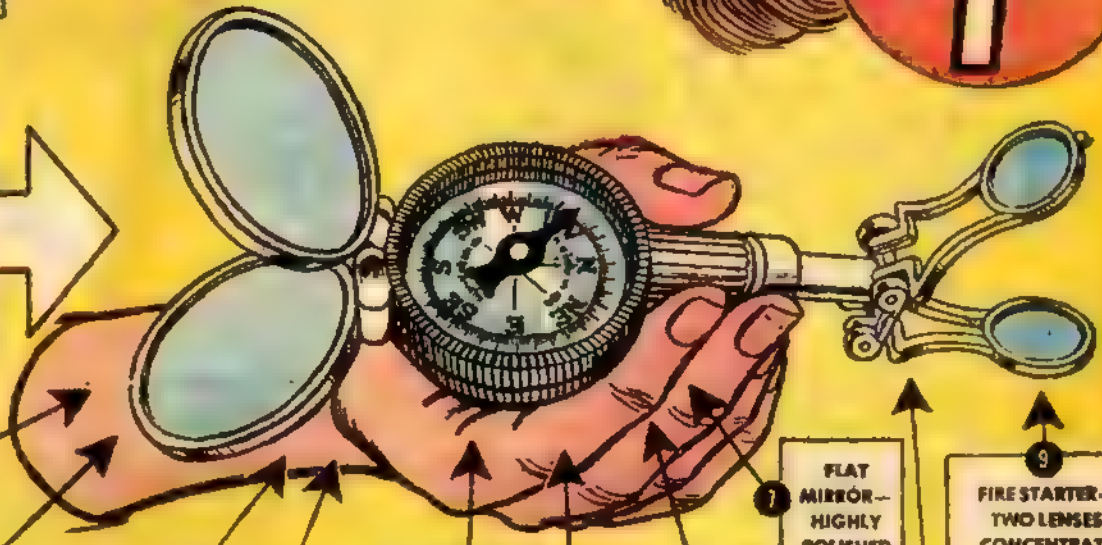

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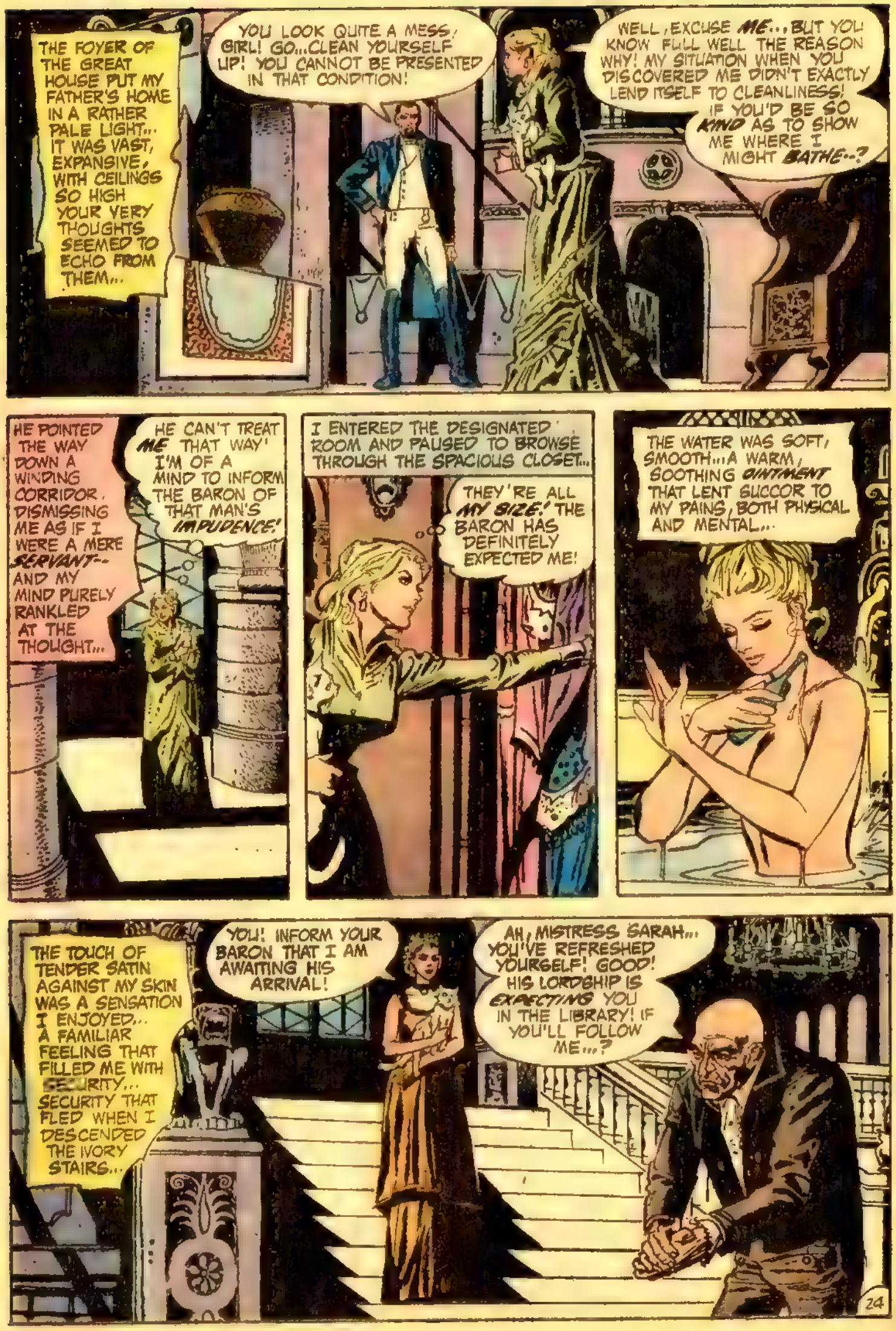
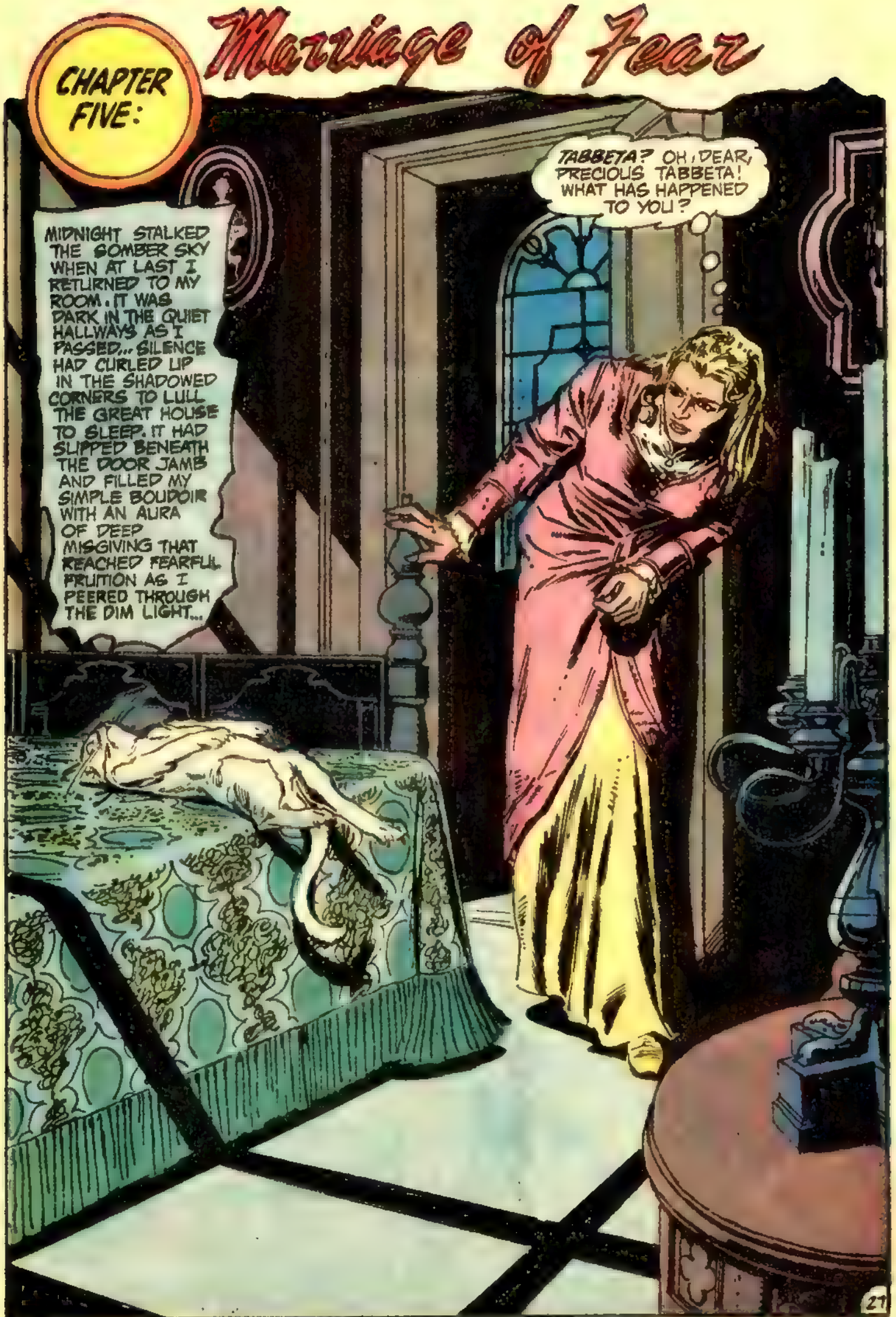
CHAPTER FOUR:
Time for Revelation
TEARS ROLLED COOL ON MY CHEEKS AS MY SILENT ESCORT AND I RODE TOWARD WHAT SEEMED TO BE A VILLAGE. ALONG THE MUDDY ROAD BEHIND WERE STREWN ALL MY WORLDLY BELONGINGS... MY DRESSES, MY HATS, MY SERVANT AGATHA--ALL OF THEM GONE. ONLY PRECIOUS VIRGINIA WAS LEFT. MY MOST DREADED FEARS WERE REALIZED--I WOULD MEET MY BARON AS A BEDRAGGLED COME CALLING...
MY MYSTERIOUS CHAMPION GLARED COLDLY AT THE BUSY PEASANTS AS WE PASSED... AND THEY DOFFED THEIR TATTERED HATS IN RETURN, IN A GESTURE THAT WAS NOT TRUELY RESPECT... BUT--- FEAR...
MY THOUGHTS RACED AS WE CANTERED ON; IF A MERE AURE COULD GENERATE SO MUCH TERROR, WHAT MUST THE BARON HIMSELF BE LIKE? I LOOKED INTO THE EYES OF THE HARRIED PEOPLE... AND THE ANSWER I SAW THERE CHILLED MY SOUL...
WE PASSED BENEATH AN IRON GATE AND MY COMPANION SPOKE AT LAST... AND THE WEIGHT OF HIS WORDS PRESSED ME INTO NERVOUS FAE
WHAT DO YOU THINK, GIRL...? WHAT IS YOUR IMPRESSION OF THE ESTATE OF THE BARON DUMONT?

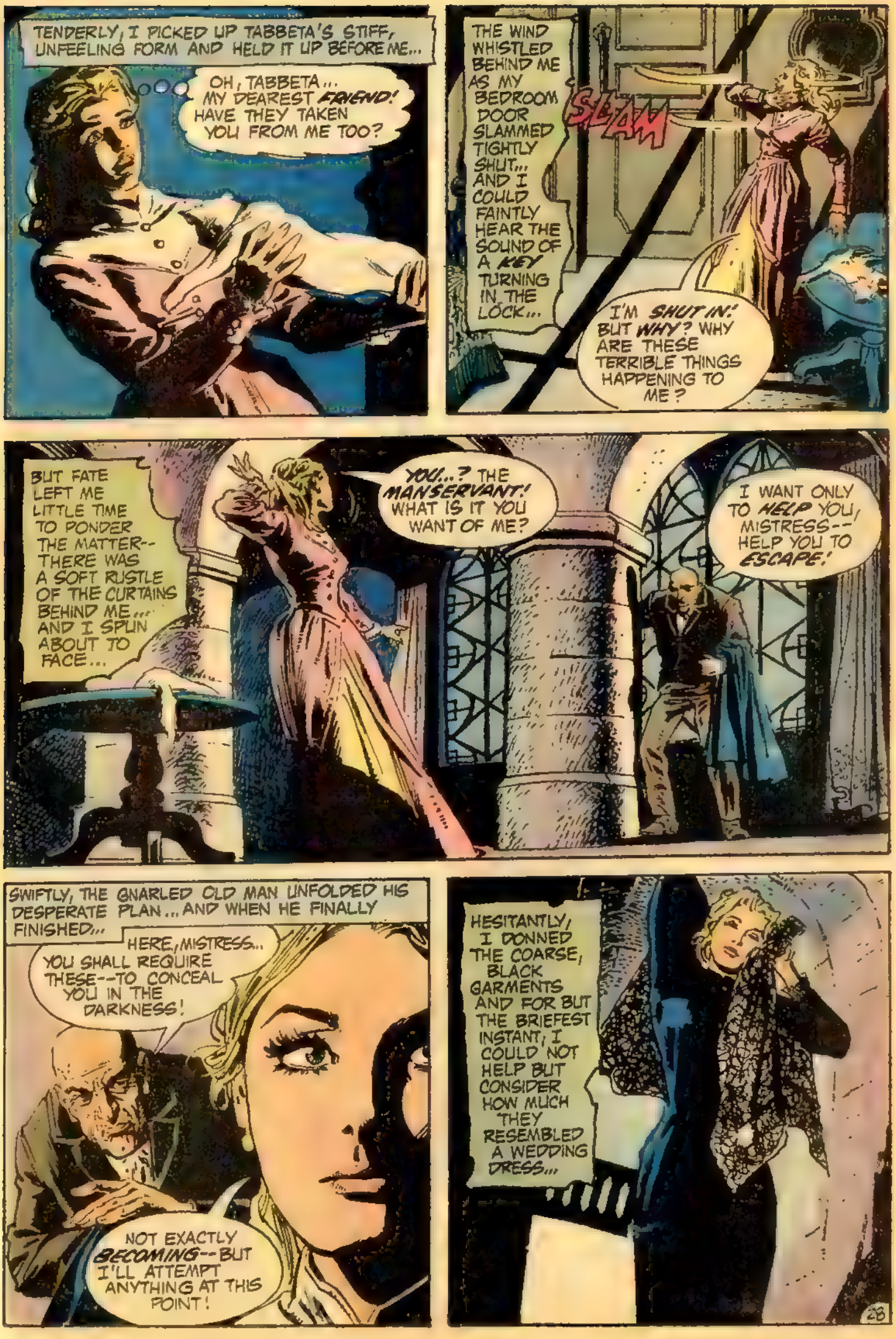

THE FOYER OF THE GREAT HOUSE PUT MY FATHER'S HOME IN A RATHER PALE LIGHT... IT WAS VAST, EXPANSIVE, WITH CEILINGS SO HIGH YOUR VERY THOUGHTS SEEMED TO ECHO FROM THEM...
YOU LOOK QUITE A MESS, GIRL! GO...CLEAN YOURSELF UP! YOU CANNOT BE PRESENTED IN THAT CONDITION!
WELL, EXCUSE ME.., BUT YOU KNOW FULL WELL THE REASON WHY! MY SITUATION WHEN YOU DISCOVERED ME DIDN'T EXACTLY LEND ITSELF TO CLEANLINESS! IF YOU'D BE SO KIND AS TO SHOW ME WHERE I MIGHT BATHE--?
HE POINTED THE WAY DOWN A WINDING CORRIDOR, DISMISSING ME AS IF I WERE A MERE SERVANT-- AND MY MIND PURELY RANKLED AT THE THOUGHT...
HE CAN'T TREAT ME THAT WAY! I'M OF A MIND TO INFORM THE BARON OF THAT MAN'S IMPUDENCE!
I ENTERED THE DESIGNATED ROOM AND PAUSED TO BROWSE THROUGH THE SPACIOUS CLOSET...
THEY'RE ALL MY SIZE! THE BARON HAS DEFINITELY EXPECTED ME!
THE WATER WAS SOFT, SMOOTH...A WARM, SOOTHING OINTMENT THAT LENT SUCCOR TO MY PAINS, BOTH PHYSICAL AND MENTAL...
THE TOUCH OF TENDER SATIN AGAINST MY SKIN WAS A SENSATION I ENJOYED... A FAMILIAR FEELING THAT FILLED ME WITH SECURITY... SECURITY THAT FLED WHEN I DESCENDED THE IVORY STAIRS...
YOU! INFORM YOUR BARON THAT I AM AWAITING HIS ARRIVAL!
AH, MISTRESS SARAH... YOU'VE REFRESHED YOURSELF! GOOD! HIS LORDSHIP IS EXPECTING YOU IN THE LIBRARY! IF YOU'LL FOLLOW ME...?

THE STOOPED, OLD MANSERVANT LED ME ALONG STILL ANOTHER DIMLY-LIT HALL. HE PAUSED, GESTURING TOWARD A DARK, OAKEN DOOR. I OPENED IT SLOWLY AND WHEN I TURNED BACK TO DISMISS HIM--THE SERVANT WAS GONE...
STRANGE OLD SORT! HE SEEMED TO REMIND ME OF SOMEONE... I WONDER...?
WHY, THERE'S NO ONE HERE!
AM I CURSED TO BE SURROUNDED BY BRIMSTONE-BURNING FOOLS? THESE ARE MODERN TIMES... THERE IS NO NEED FOR THE SUPER-NATURAL HERE! WHY WON'T IT LEAVE ME IN PEACE?
A DISTURBINGLY FAMILIAR SMELL WAFTED TOWARD ME AND AS I FOLLOWED IT TO ITS SOURCE, DRAWING ASIDE AN ORNATE CURTAIN...
WHY, IT'S MY RESCUER... STANDING INSIDE A... PENTAGRAM!?!
HE TURNED SLOWLY TOWARD ME, HIS EYES DEATHLY COLD... SEARING A PAINFUL WOUND DEEP INTO THE BOSOM OF MY SOUL...
WHERE IS THE BARON? I WOULD SPEAK TO HIM OF THIS!
YOU LITTLE IDIOT-- HAVE YOU NOT REALIZED YET? I AM THE BARON DUMONT... AND YOU, MY DEAR, ARE MINE!

THE BARON MOVED SLOWLY TOWARD ME, HIS GAZE HOLDING ME HELPLESS LIKE A MOTH IS HELD BY FLAME. HIS POWERFUL ARMS SLID AROUND MY WAIST...
...DRAWING ME AGAINST HIS STRONG CHEST... AND HIS LIPS REACHED LONGINGLY FOR MINE...
THERE WAS POWER IN HIS KISS... AND YET A SORT OF SEARCHING TENDERNESS THAT COMPELLED ME TO RESPOND...
AND I FOUND I DID NOT MIND THE COMPULSION...
I SANK TO MY KNEES AS A FEELING OF SWEET SURCEASE FLOODED ACROSS MY MIND. THIS WAS LUTHER DUMONT--THE MAN I HAD COME TO MARRY...A MAN I WAS BEING FORCED TO MARRY... YET THAT NO LONGER SEEMED TO MATTER. ALREADY THE IMAGE OF JUSTIN'S FACE WAS BECOMING BLURRED, VAGUE IN MY MIND...
CONTINUED ON 2ND PAGE FOLLOWING

SSP
SUPER SONIC POWER
Kenner's SMASH-UP DERBY
WHIR-RRR-RRRRRRRRRR
WHIR-RRRRRR
CRASH!
HEY! YOU GUYS ARE SMASHING UP YOUR SSP RACERS!
YOU KNOW IT! WE'VE GOT THE SSP SMASH-UP DERBY!
CRUNCH!
"WITH RACERS THAT WORK JUST LIKE ALL SSP CARS...
PULL
WHIR-RRR-RR
READY TO RACE! NO BATTERIES! NO TRACK!
GYRO-POWERED!
BUT WHAT A DIFFERENCE!
WHAM!
DOORS, HOOD, WHEELS, TRUNK LID FLY OFF ON IMPACT!
"THE BIGGER THE SMASH-UP... THE MORE PIECES FLY OFF!"
WHRAMM
"AFTER AN EVENT— JUST SNAP TOGETHER AND YOU'RE READY FOR THE NEXT RACE!"
SNAP!
"WE USE THE JUMP RAMP/BARRIER THAT COMES WITH THE SET TO DO ALL KINDS OF SMASH-UP DERBY STUNTS!"
LEAPS
HILLTOP SMASHES
MID-AIR SCRUNCHERS
WALL CRUSHERS
BOY, IT'S GOT ALL THE THRILLS OF A REAL DEMOLITION DERBY!
CRASH!
SMASH-UP DERBY
Kenner's SSP SMASH-UP DERBY INCLUDES:
2 SPECIAL FLY APART SSP RACERS EACH ABOUT 7" LONG WITH SCRUNCHED-UP DETAILING. HAVE HIDDEN GYRO-WHEEL WITH POWER SLOTS IN ROOF.
2 JUMP RAMP/BARRIER SIMULATED BRICK WALL WITH RAMP TO LEAP UP TO 4 FEET. 2 T-HANDLE POWER STICKS.


CHAPTER FIVE:
Marriage of Fear
MIDNIGHT STALKED THE SOMBER SKY WHEN AT LAST I RETURNED TO MY ROOM. IT WAS DARK IN THE QUIET HALLWAYS AS I PASSED... SILENCE HAD CURLED UP IN THE SHADOWED CORNERS TO LULL THE GREAT HOUSE TO SLEEP. IT HAD SLIPPED BENEATH THE DOOR JAMB AND FILLED MY SIMPLE BOUDOIR WITH AN AURA OF DEEP MISGIVING THAT REACHED FEARFUL FRUITION AS I PEERED THROUGH THE DIM LIGHT...
TABBETA? OH, DEAR, PRECIOUS TABBETA! WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU?
27


TENDERLY, I PICKED UP TABBETA'S STIFF, UNFEELING FORM AND HELD IT UP BEFORE ME...
OH, TABBETA... MY DEAREST FRIEND! HAVE THEY TAKEN YOU FROM ME TOO?
THE WIND WHISTLED BEHIND ME AS MY BEDROOM DOOR SLAMMED TIGHTLY SHUT... AND I COULD FAINTLY HEAR THE SOUND OF A KEY TURNING IN THE LOCK...
SLAM
I'M SHUT IN! BUT WHY? WHY ARE THESE TERRIBLE THINGS HAPPENING TO ME?
BUT FATE LEFT ME LITTLE TIME TO PONDER THE MATTER-- THERE WAS A SOFT RUSTLE OF THE CURTAINS BEHIND ME... AND I SPUN ABOUT TO FACE...
YOU...? THE MANSERVANT! WHAT IS IT YOU WANT OF ME?
I WANT ONLY TO HELP YOU, MISTRESS-- HELP YOU TO ESCAPE!
SWIFTLY, THE GNARLED OLD MAN UNFOLDED HIS DESPERATE PLAN... AND WHEN HE FINALLY FINISHED...
HERE, MISTRESS... YOU SHALL REQUIRE THESE--TO CONCEAL YOU IN THE DARKNESS!
NOT EXACTLY BECOMING--BUT I'LL ATTEMPT ANYTHING AT THIS POINT!
HESITANTLY, I DONNED THE COARSE, BLACK GARMENTS AND FOR BUT THE BRIEFEST INSTANT, I COULD NOT HELP BUT CONSIDER HOW MUCH THEY RESEMBLED A WEDDING DRESS...
28

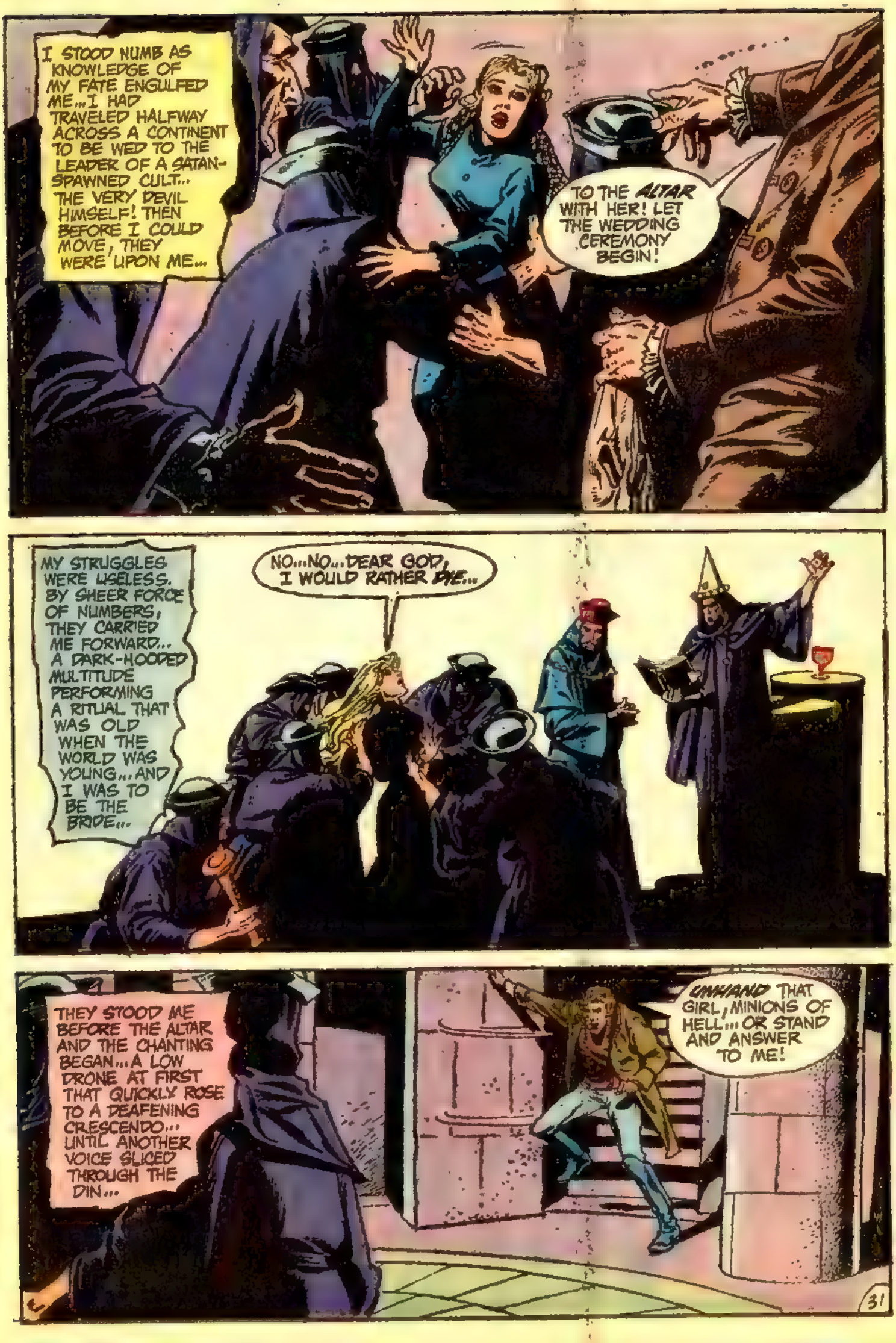
SILENTLY, THE OLD MAN PULLED AWAY THE CARPETING AND A SECTION OF THE WOODEN FLOOR SWUNG OPEN AT HIS COMMAND. THEN HE BADE ME FOLLOW...
A STONE STAIRCASE WOUND ENDLESSLY DOWN BENEATH US AND WE DESCENDED SLOWLY, OUR BODIES VIRTUALLY CUTTING THEIR WAY THROUGH THE DUST-THICK AIR...
FOR AN ENDLESS TIME, WE FOLLOWED THE SERPENTINE PASSAGEWAY DOWNWARD... UNTIL, AT LENGTH, FINGERS OF COLD LIGHT REACHED UP TOWARD US AND WE FOUND OURSELVES STANDING BEFORE A GREAT ROCK-HEWN CHAMBER--AS A BIZARRE RITUAL UNFOLDED IN FRONT OF MY ASTONISHED EYES...
W-WHAT IS THIS PLACE? WHERE HAVE YOU BROUGHT ME?
29

I TURNED TO FLEE, BUT THE WIZENED MANSERVANT BARRED MY PATH, LAUGHING SOFTLY AT MY UNABASHED IGNORANCE...
MISTRESS SARAH, YE SURPRISE ME--! DON'T YE REALIZE WHAT IS HAPPENING YET?

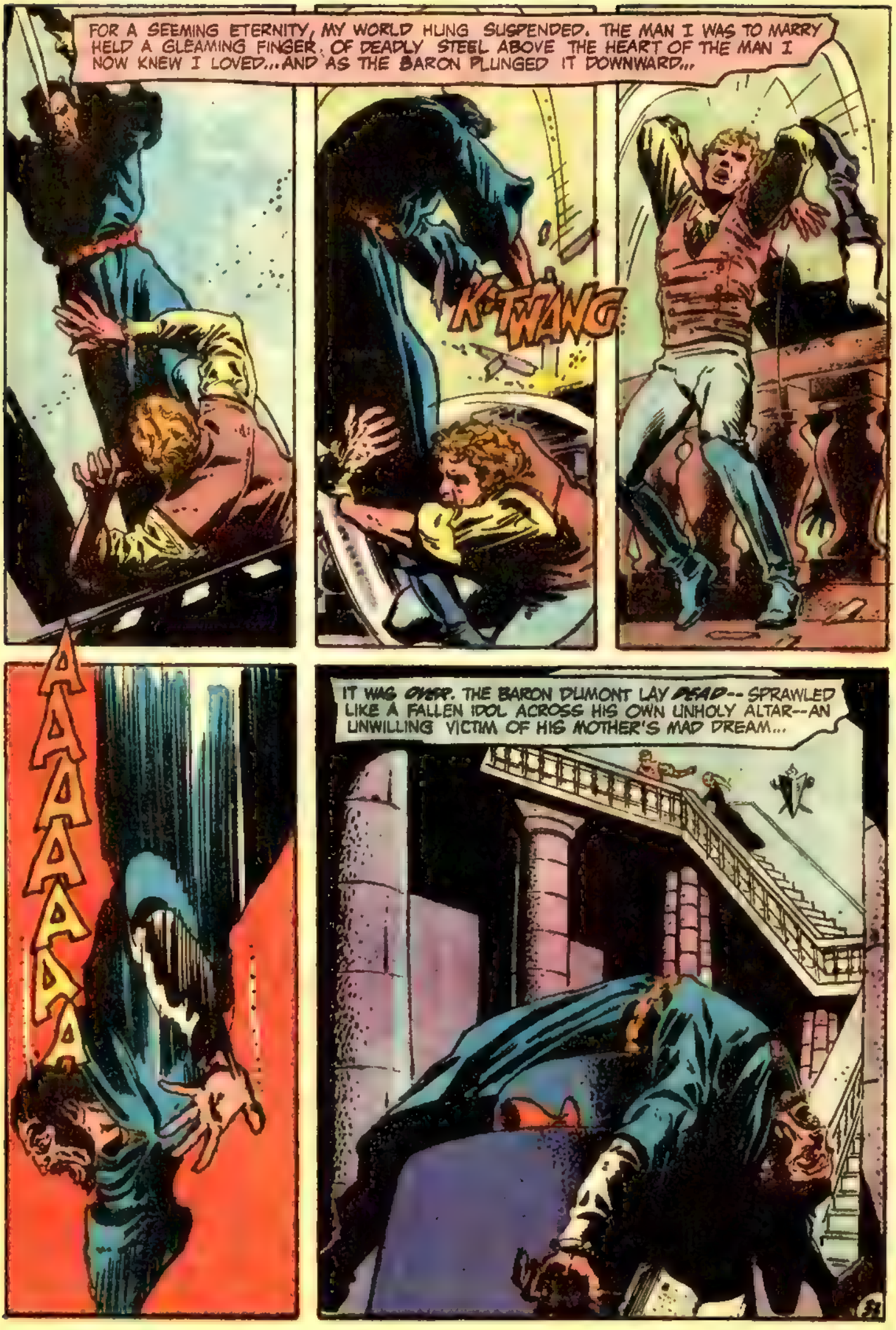
GNARLED FINGERS TORE AT THE WEATHERED FLESH AND, VIOLENTLY, THE OLD MAN'S FEATURES WERE RIPPED AWAY, TO BE REPLACED BY THE TAUNTING VISAGE OF...
DON'T YE RECOGNIZE YER FAITHFUL SERVANT-- AGATHA?!

MY MIND SCREAMED AT THE REVELATION THAT THIS OLD WOMAN I THOUGHT DEAD WAS STANDING BEFORE ME... BUT MY VOICE COULD MAKE NO SOUND AS SHE CONTINUED HER MAD TIRADE...
AYE, MISTRESS SARAH-- DAUGHTER THAT I NEVER HAD-- I LIVE! I LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO SEE THE FULFILLMENT OF MY DREAM... THE DAUGHTER I NEVER CARRIED WED TO THE SON I DID!

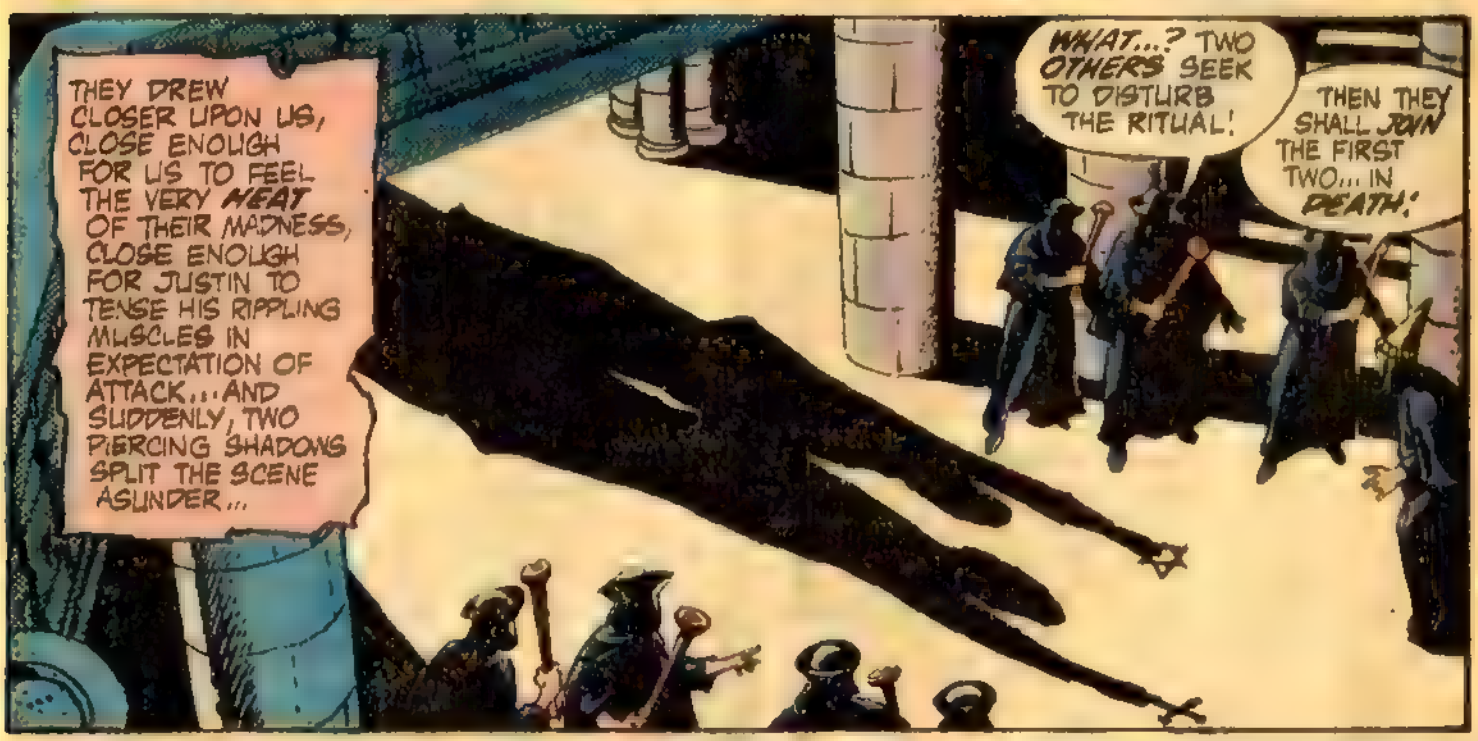
SILENTLY, THE LEADER OF THE BIZARRE CULT TURNED HIS HOODED HEAD TO ME... AND, IN HORROR, I BEHELD THE FACE OF OLD AGATHA'S SON-- THE FACE OF THE BARON DUMONT!

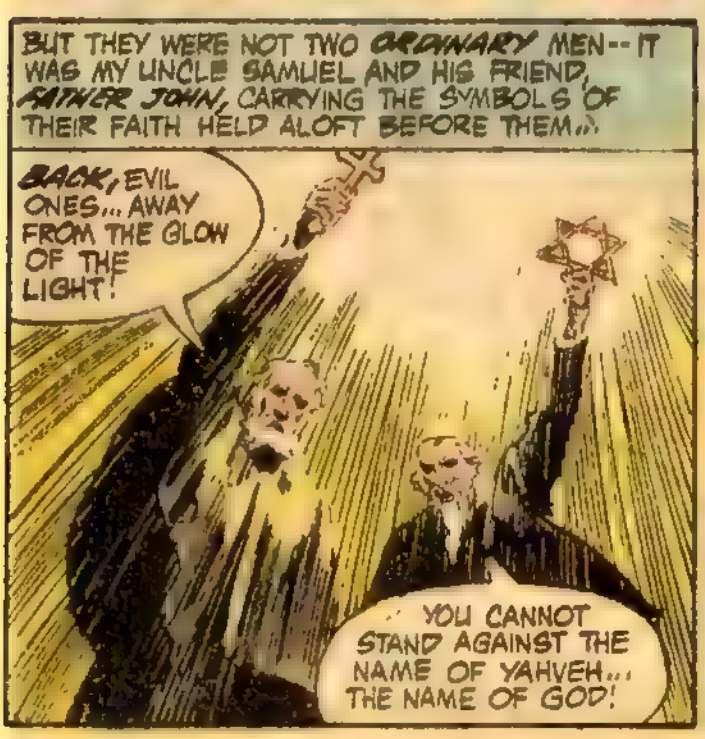

I STOOD NUMB AS KNOWLEDGE OF MY FATE ENGULFED ME...I HAD TRAVELED HALFWAY ACROSS A CONTINENT TO BE WED TO THE LEADER OF A SATAN-SPAWNED CULT... THE VERY DEVIL HIMSELF! THEN BEFORE I COULD MOVE, THEY WERE UPON ME...
TO THE ALTAR WITH HER! LET THE WEDDING CEREMONY BEGIN!
MY STRUGGLES WERE USELESS. BY SHEER FORCE OF NUMBERS, THEY CARRIED ME FORWARD... A DARK-HOODED MULTITUDE PERFORMING A RITUAL THAT WAS OLD WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG...AND I WAS TO BE THE BRIDE...
NO...NO...DEAR GOD, I WOULD RATHER DIE...
THEY STOOD ME BEFORE THE ALTAR AND THE CHANTING BEGAN...A LOW DRONE AT FIRST THAT QUICKLY ROSE TO A DEAFENING CRESCENDO... UNTIL ANOTHER VOICE SLICED THROUGH THE DIN...
UNHAND THAT GIRL, MINIONS OF HELL... OR STAND AND ANSWER TO ME!
31

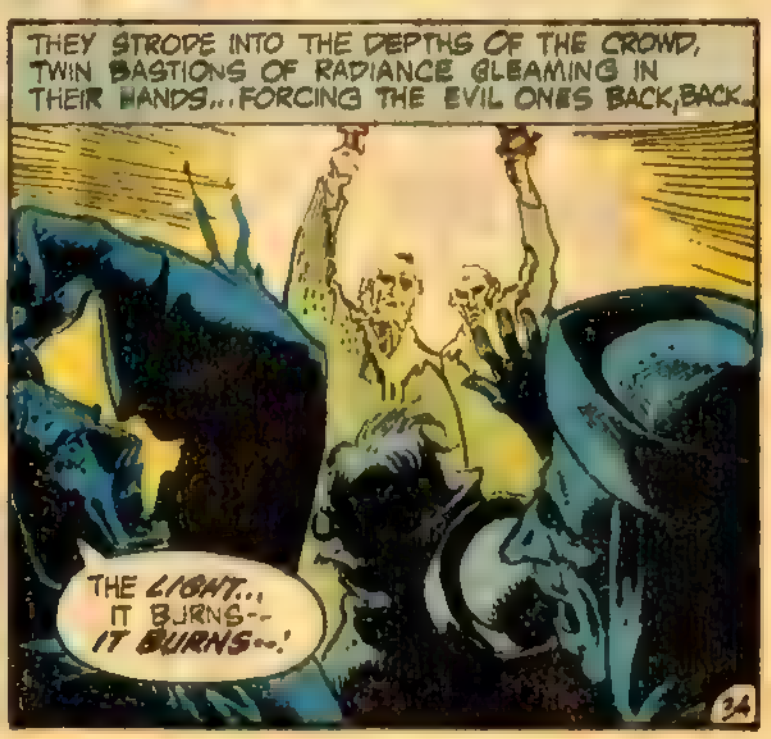
IT WAS JUSTIN...MY JUSTIN...WHO HAD SOMEHOW TRACKED ME ACROSS THE FACE OF THE WORLD. HE BURST THROUGH THE PERIMETER OF THE SHROUDED CIRCLE... HIS SHINING EYES FOCUSED ON A SINGLE FOE...
HOLD, BARON... STAND AND FACE ME LIKE A MAN!
THE BARON SCURRIED UP THE CARVED STAIRS LIKE A FRIGHTENED RABBIT, HIS HAND FASTENING UPON A BROAD-SWORD THAT HUNG UPON THE WALL--AND JUSTIN FOLLOWED SUIT...
LIKE KNIGHTS OF OLD THEY BATTLED THEIR WAY UP THE STAIRS, THRUSTING, FEINTING, PARRYING...THE SOUND OF STEEL UPON STEEL RINGING THROUGH THE HALL LIKE THE DEATH KNELL OF A DREAM...
CLANK
JUSTIN READIED HIS WEAPON FOR THE TRIUMPHANT STROKE BUT IN THAT HESITANT INSTANT BEFORE HE THRUST THE BLADE HOME...THE BARON MOVED! AND USING A TORCH STANCHION AS A CUDGEL, HE SENT MY BELOVED SPRAWLING...
32

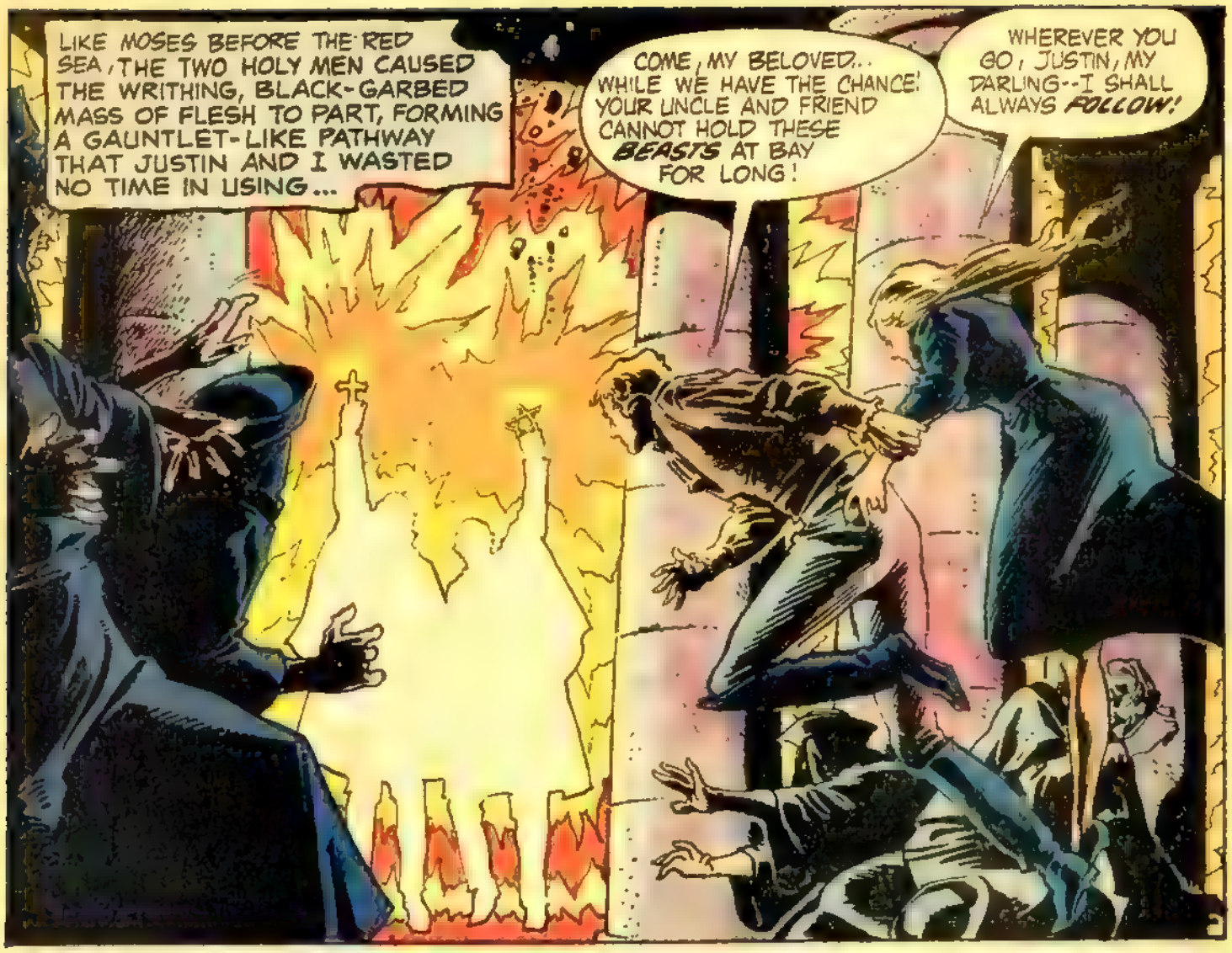

FOR A SEEMING ETERNITY, MY WORLD HUNG SUSPENDED. THE MAN I WAS TO MARRY HELD A GLEAMING FINGER OF DEADLY STEEL ABOVE THE HEART OF THE MAN I NOW KNEW I LOVED...AND AS THE BARON PLUNGED IT DOWNWARD...
K-TWANG
AAAAAA
IT WAS OVER. THE BARON DUMONT LAY DEAD-- SPRAWLED LIKE A FALLEN IDOL ACROSS HIS OWN UNHOLY ALTAR--AN UNWILLING VICTIM OF HIS MOTHER'S MAD DREAM...

OR WAS IT OVER? JUSTIN AND I MOVED SWIFTLY TOWARDS THE STAIRWAY AND ESCAPE, ONLY TO D'SCOVER THE SHROUDED ASSEMBLAGE STANDING IN OUR PATH. WEAPONS RAISED MENACINGLY IN THEIR HANDS... AND MURDER BUBBLING IN THEIR EYES...
THEY HAVE DESTROYED OUR MASTER! WE MUST SACRIFICE THEM IN RETURN!
KILL THEM!


THEY DREW CLOSER UPON US, CLOSE ENOUGH FOR US TO FEEL THE VERY HEAT OF THEIR MADNESS, CLOSE ENOUGH FOR JUSTIN TO TENSE HIS RIPPLING MUSCLES IN EXPECTATION OF ATTACK... AND SUDDENLY, TWO PIERCING SHADOWS SPLIT THE SCENE ASUNDER...
WHAT...? TWO OTHERS SEEK TO DISTURB THE RITUAL!
THEN THEY SHALL JOIN THE FIRST TWO... IN DEATH!


BUT THEY WERE NOT TWO ORDINARY MEN -- IT WAS MY UNCLE SAMUEL AND HIS FRIEND, FATHER JOHN, CARRYING THE SYMBOLS OF THEIR FAITH HELD ALOFT BEFORE THEM...
BACK, EVIL ONES... AWAY FROM THE GLOW OF THE LIGHT!
YOU CANNOT STAND AGAINST THE NAME OF YAHVEH... THE NAME OF GOD!


THEY STRODE INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE CROWD, TWIN BASTIONS OF RADIANCE GLEAMING IN THEIR HANDS... FORCING THE EVIL ONES BACK, BACK...
THE LIGHT... IT BURNS-- IT BURNS--!


LIKE MOSES BEFORE THE RED SEA, THE TWO HOLY MEN CAUSED THE WRITHING, BLACK-GARBED MASS OF FLESH TO PART, FORMING A GAUNTLET-LIKE PATHWAY THAT JUSTIN AND I WASTED NO TIME IN USING...
COME, MY BELOVED.. WHILE WE HAVE THE CHANCE! YOUR UNCLE AND FRIEND CANNOT HOLD THESE BEASTS AT BAY FOR LONG!
WHEREVER YOU GO, JUSTIN, MY DARLING--I SHALL ALWAYS FOLLOW!

BUT THE MADNESS WAS NOT YET AT AN END. SUDDENLY, THE FLOOR BENEATH US BEGAN SHUDDERING VIOLENTLY; SMALL CHUNKS OF STONE DROPPED LIKE RAIN FROM THE CEILING...AND IN OUR HEADLONG FLIGHT, FATHER JOHN PAUSED..
THE BUILDING BEGINS TO DIE! QUICKLY... FOLLOW US! WE SHALL LEAD YOU ALL TO SAFETY!

OLD AGATHA STANDING TALL AMID THE FALLING RUBBLE...AND THE SOUND OF HER VOICE, COLD AND RESIGNED, IS A MEMORY I SHALL TAKE WITH ME TO MY GRAVE...
FORGET ABOUT US--AND FLEE! WE BELONG HERE... TO PERISH WITH OUR DREAM!

THERE WAS LITTLE TIME TO ARGUE THE POINT. WE RACED UP THE SHUDDERING STAIRWAY... AND THE SUDDEN SOUND OF COLLAPSING CONCRETE AND STONE FILLED THE CAVERNOUS CHAMBER BENEATH US BEYOND ITS BURSTING POINT...
THEY HAVE GONE TO MEET THEIR MASTER-- AND MAY GOD HAVE MERCY ON THEIR SOULS!
THE GREAT HOUSE WAS WRITHING IN ITS DEATH THROES AS WE GAINED THE SURFACE ONCE MORE... JAGGED CRACKS HAD OPENED IN THE POLISHED MARBLE FLOOR AND THE TAPESTRIES WERE FALLING INTO DUST...
GREAT GOUTS OF SMOKE AND FLAME RUTTED THE EBONY SKY AS THE MANSION OF THE BARON DUMONT SCREAMED AND DIED. WE WATCHED ITS ENDING SILENTLY, JUSTIN AND I, OUR ARMS ENTWINED ABOUT ONE ANOTHER... AND I FELT AS IF I WERE RISING FROM BENEATH THE WEIGHT OF AGATHA'S OPPRESSIVE SPELL... AN ENCHANTMENT THAT HAD PERISHED WITH HER...
AND TRY AS I MIGHT, I COULD FEEL NO REMORSE...
CONTINUED ON PAGE FOLLOWING

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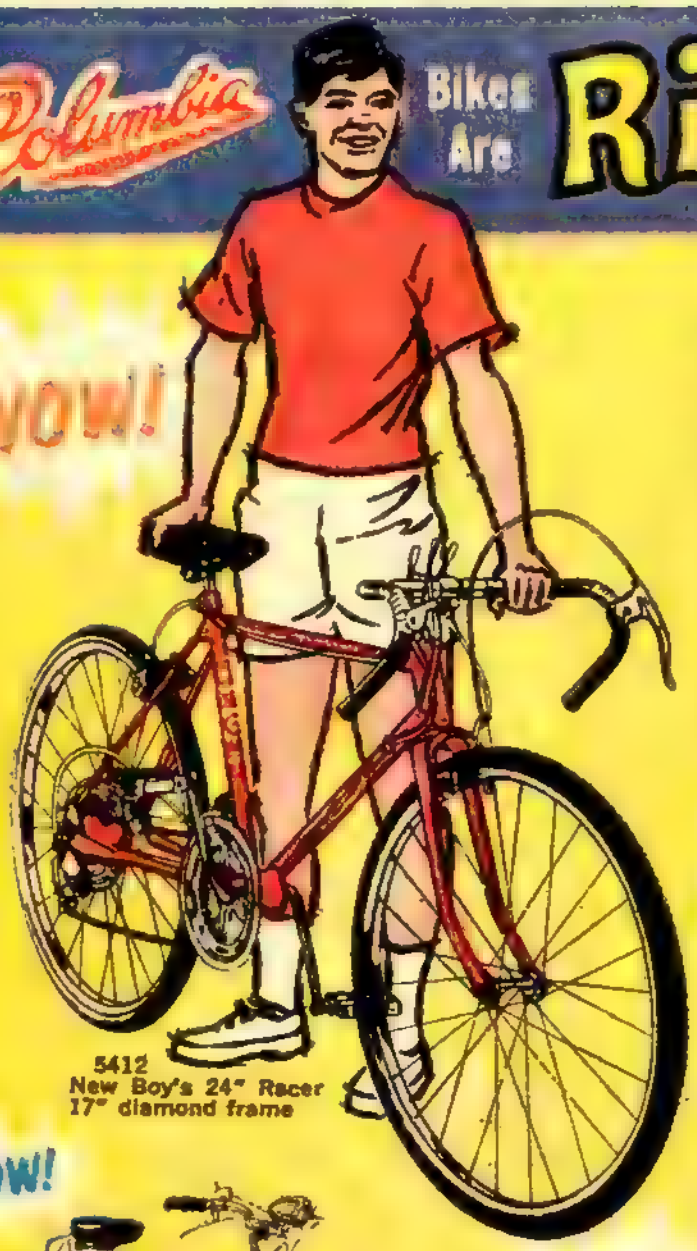

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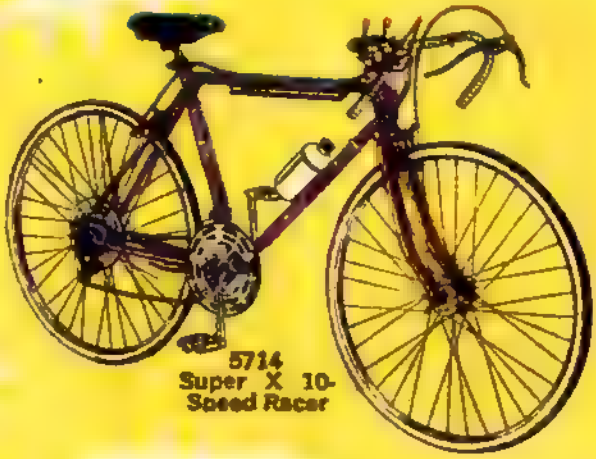

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EPILOGUE

It was a small wedding, attended only by the closest of family and friends, but still, the small chapel at the rear of my father's house was sorely pressed to accommodate everyone. The altar was lovely, garnished by scented, white roses that entwined themselves about the climbing trellis—and I reflected the flowers' ivory beauty, gowned as I was in snowy silk and filigreed lace, my eyes damp with anticipation.

The organ music drifted softly through the sweet air and I started down the aisle on my father's arm to meet my darling Justin. I stole but the briefest glance at my father as we walked to meet my future: his face was quiet, soft, glowing with the sort of pride all fathers must feel on this day of days—and I was touched to see he was *crying*.

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Justin looked every bit the hero he was to me, dressed in cutaway coat, pinstriped trousers and blossoming boutonniere. They had finished serving the wedding cake and everyone had settled down to tea and conversation; Justin and I mingling casually, receiving the blessings of our guests.

"There was never a more beautiful bride."

It was my father speaking, moving easily towards us through the crowd. He paused, took Justin's hand and placed his other on Justin's shoulder in a gesture of welcome. "I owe you far more than mere apologies, Justin," he said hesitantly.

"I was never more wrong in all my life. I shunned you, embarrassed you, called you unfit for my daughter—and yet, old Agatha, who sought only to betray and destroy me, lived beneath my very roof. Do you think you'll ever begin to *forgive* me?" My father looked almost pleadingly into Justin's deep eyes—and found comfort there.

"There is nothing to forgive, Father Jacobs. You did what you did for love of Sarah, as did I. No man should ever be condemned for loving too much." Justin smiled at my father and returned the comforting gesture—and the room seemed suddenly brighter.

A soft, doughy-looking fat man weaved his way toward us through the tangle of revelers with surprising agility and grace; this was Benjamin Barton, one of the largest investors in my father's bank.

I watched his approach with fascination; he listed slightly from side to side as he walked but, amazingly, the brimful glass he carried in his fleshy hand never lost a drop of liquid. "Congratulations, Abraham," he said, with only the slightest hint of a lisp. "Your heart must be brimming with love on a morning like this."

"One's heart has room enough for many things, Benjamin." There was a subtle note of agitation in my father's voice as he spoke, and the fat man seemed to sense that and reacted accordingly.

"Really, Abraham—such animosity on your daughter's wedding day? I'm surprised. Especially when there is really no need

"I've spoken to many of the other large investors in your bank and, once they heard the entire story—how it was your servant and her son who had manipulated your investments into the situation that occurred—they seemed open to considering a redeposit of their holdings under your care.

"Of course, there would be the matter of a Board of Directors meeting to determine whether you will retain Chairmanship . . ."

I saw the skin around the edges of my father's eyes tighten as he glared at his plump associate. "Thank you, Benjamin—but no thanks. If my bank ever reopens, it will be under *my* control or no one's. And if it doesn't reopen—well, perhaps that will be all right, too.

"I've learned things in these past few weeks, Benjamin. I've learned that the trust and respect of my daughter is worth the assets of boundless banks. Perhaps I never will recover all of my fortune but if I do, it will not be for me . . ." My father paused, turned to look at me—and a smile lit his face. "It will be for my *grandchildren*."

The friendly grin slowly fled the fat man's features as he disappeared back into the jovial throng, muttering softly under his breath. My father, Justin and I stood silently for a moment, struggling to stifle the laughter that bubbled up from within us. We almost succeeded.

"It pleases me to see hearts so filled with happiness on this joyous day." Softly, as was his custom, my Uncle Samuel had come up behind us and now rested his tender hands upon our shoulders. His constant companion, the Father John, stood at his side, smiling.

"The Lord works in wondrous ways," my uncle said softly, with that now-familiar quiver in his voice that underlied the thought behind his words. "In the end, I was certain he would lead his wandering lambs home—and so he did."

Uncle Samuel turned to my father, glaring at him with a look that only true *brothers* can know, and gestured toward Justin. "You may thank the good Lord that he saw beyond the money-hunger in your eyes and led this brave young man to our Sarah's side. Had it not been for Justin's insistance, we would never have followed your daughter to Bohemia to arrive when we did—and her soul would have been long since lost to *Hell*."

My poor, sweet father cast his eyes to the floor, his head bowed in shame. "Enough, Samuel, I beg you. Do you suppose I have thought of nothing else? The vision you described of the black-cloaked coven dragging my Sarah to that unholy altar is a dream that shall haunt me unto death."

Uncle Samuel's wrinkled features softened and he placed a comforting arm across my father's shoulders. "Forgive me, Abraham. I was too harsh. You were not truly responsible for what you did with that *witch* at your side. Hers was a scheme of such magnitude as to boggle the mind.

"All those years, living in your home, watching Sarah grow, and plotting—planning to wed your blossoming daughter to a son she had never revealed." He paused once again, considering where to continue. "The patience old Agatha must have had to wait those long and lonely years, quietly manipulating the fabric of your lives—!"

"Ah, but her time was not spent all in waiting, friend Samuel." It was Father John who spoke, and his deep, stentorial tones lent an air of solemnity to everything he said. "Agatha was amassing quite a dowry for your Sarah, utilizing the powers of the coven she commanded to control that entire village and construct the mansion that tumbled into dust with her death. Hers was a strange sort of mother love, friend Samuel."

Uncle Samuel turned to look at his friend. "Perhaps. If *any* form of love can truly be called *strange*."

Justin's hand tightened about my waist and I felt his overpowering love for me flow through his fingertips. I was his bride now. Soon I would leave my father's house, with all its beauty and comfort, for what could be the last time. I would leave behind all the wealth and position that the great house had once meant to me—for the life of a working man's wife. But Justin and I had our love, a power far greater than any that wealth could attain.

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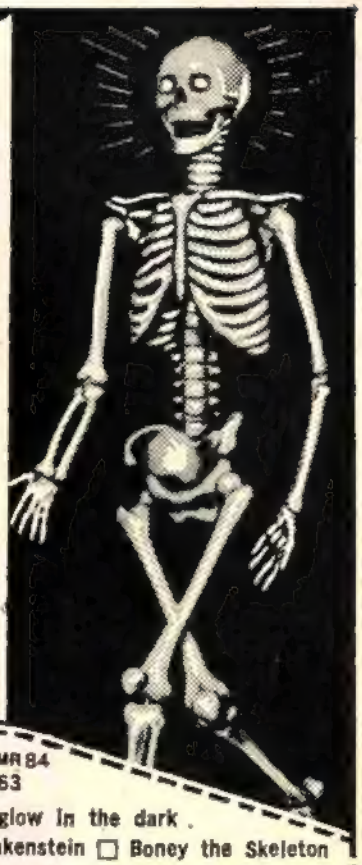

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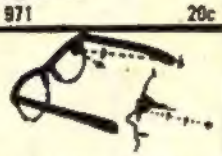

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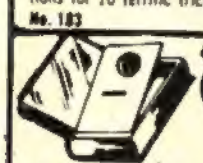

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Looks like any book to camouflage your valuables. Securely locked with your own private combination. Tough under-structure is covered with simulated leather binding.

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Please add 25c to total order for postage and handling.

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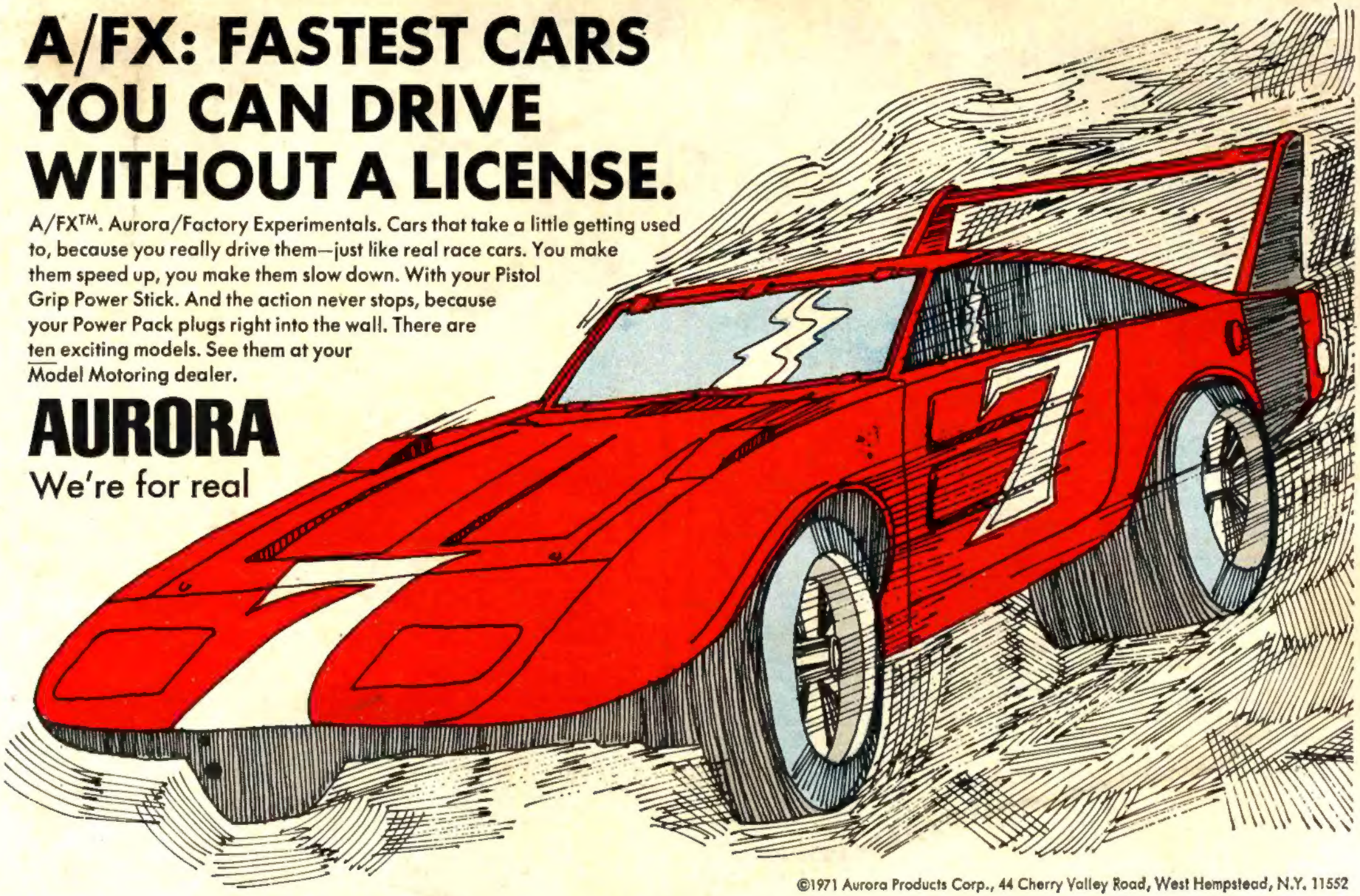

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